

WILLIAM W.
JOHNSTONE



THE
DEVIL'S
KISS

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NIGHT OF DOOM

The teenagers left the silver lake and walked slowly toward the dark timber.

"Larry? That strange smell is making me sick. I don't want to go in there."

"Aw, come on! Don't get all spooked-out," Larry replied, but admitted to himself that something was wrong, dreadfully wrong.

Suddenly they heard a low growl, and then a snarl from the timber, just a few yards away.

Joan grabbed his hand and shouted, "Come on, Larry. Run!"

Then a scream touched them, a howling. A shriek of such hideousness that the young couple ran blindly through the night.

"Oh my God!" Larry screamed as he pointed to the grotesque figures surrounding them, encircling them with eyes red and wild. The Beasts were large, long-legged, and clumsy—and they were hungry. They wanted raw meat, the sweet, hot, salty taste of blood. Not fearing the darkness they knew so well, they chased Larry and Joan—knowing that their appetite would soon be satisfied . . .

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God and the devil are fighting there, and the battlefield is the
heart of man.

—Dostoevski

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PROLOGUE

The minister slowed his car, then smiled with recognition at the man standing by the side of the road, beside his automobile. The minister pulled off the highway, cut his engine, and got out.

"You're a long way from home, old friend," the minister said. "Got car troubles?"

"No," the man replied, the sunlight of early spring sparkling off a strange-looking medallion hanging about his neck. "But you're a long way from home as well, Brother Hayes."

"Once a month to Waldron until they find a minister. But you know that."

"Yes. How did the services go?"

"Very well, thank you. But why are you out here? Not to be prying, of course." The Baptist minister cut his eyes as he detected movement in the rear seat of the automobile. His eyes widened with shock. "What... why, that's Reverend Balon's wife! What—?"

He had turned toward the car, not believing a deacon in his church would have another man's wife with him—not this far from Whitfield. Then he saw the other man. Dalton Revere, an elder in Balon's church. The minister moved toward the car, to get a better look at the couple seated in the rear.

He had heard talk, but had dismissed it as rumor. Now this.

Mrs. Balon, a very beautiful woman, sat close to Dalton, her hand resting on his leg in an intimate touch. Her hair was disheveled, lipstick smeared.

"Church business?" Hayes asked, acid disapproval in his tone.

"Sorry you had to find out like this," Dalton smiled. "But you weren't coming around to our way. You had to discover the truth someday soon."

"Our way?" Hayes's look was of confusion. "The truth?" His eyes touched the medallion each wore around their necks. Strange medallions.

"The only way," Mrs. Balon smiled. "The only truth."

"What are you talking about, Michelle?"

Something smashed into the back of the minister's head, dropping him to his knees, the front of his head striking the side of the car, bloodying his nose. He turned pain-filled eyes upward. "Otto, please. No!"

The tire iron beat him into unconsciousness, shattering the skull, sending bits of bone deep into his brain. One more blow from the iron

bar, and the minister was dead, quivering on the gravel shoulder.

"Take his money," Dalton said, getting out of the car. "We'll make it look like robbery. Put his car over there," he pointed to a low hill, "with him in the trunk. Be careful not to leave any prints on anything. We're not in Fork—this will be investigated."

Otto held up the bloody tire iron.

"Put that in the trunk of our car. We'll dispose of it when we get back to Whitfield."

The minister's body was stuffed into the trunk of his car, the car hidden behind the low hill. The trio drove away.

"Now you can bring in your man, Farben," Dalton said. "He'll fill your pulpit and phase one will be complete."

"But there are others we have to worry about," Otto reminded him.

"Father Dubois and Lucas Monroe are old men. They will be no problem. Glen Haskell will have to be dealt with—soon. He could give us some trouble. But it's Sam I'm worried about. He glanced at Michelle. "Remember what the Master said."

"Don't worry about my husband," she smiled, and the parting and widening of her lips was evil. "When the time is right, I'll kill him."

"Then we're almost ready," Dalton's smile was nasty. "With that psalm-singing sheriff dead, Walter in office, all we have to do is get rid of John Benton, and the law is ours."

"How much longer do we have to wait?" Otto asked, his free hand busy between Michelle's legs.

"Not long," Dalton said, one hand touching the medallion about his neck, the other hand caressing Michelle's breasts. "Not long."

"Stop the car!" Michelle said. "Pull over there behind that hill. I want you both."

ONE

They were kids, teenagers, out on a date. A couple of hours spent at the local teen hangout—the only one in town—followed by a few bottles of beer, then some necking and petting in the cab of the boy's pickup truck, borrowed from his father. Early spring in Fork County, the cab of the truck steaming and fogging up from the heavy breathing, most of that coming from the young man.

"No!" the girl said firmly. "And I mean NO!"

"Aw, come on, Joan. You gotta do something. I'm hurting!"

"Larry, NO!" she wriggled from his damp clutches. "Come on, let's stop." She buttoned her blouse. "I'm sorry, Larry. I really am. I told you, I didn't want to come out here and go through all this."

A heavy sigh of resignation from Larry. He was whipped; he knew it. But he didn't feel all that bad. At least he had tried.

"How 'bout a walk, Joan? Clear our heads some."

"My head is perfectly clear, Larry," she said, attempting a primness in her voice. She fought to hide a smile, then giggled.

"Yeah," the boy said disgustedly. "Real funny, Joan. Come on."

They walked, hand in hand, strolling through the cool night. For Larry, it was to be his last walk.

Larry whistled an off-key version of a popular song. "You still listen to the radio station, Joan?"

"No. Not anymore. It—I don't know—I got kind of nervous listening to it, you know?"

"No. I mean, I don't listen to it anymore, either. But I know what you mean about the nervous bit, though. Me, too. Are the rest of the kids acting, you know, kind of funny to you?"

"Yes, they are, most of them. I don't want to hang around with them anymore. They're kind of way-out to me."

"I know what you mean, I think. The kids around this part of Fork used to be cool. Now—I don't know. Seems like all they want to do is—strange stuff.

"I know. Even my folks are acting funny. Daddy looks at me kind of—ugly, I guess is the word."

"I'm sorry about—back there, Joan."

"It's okay. Forget it. I just didn't want things to get out of hand."

"Yeah." I'll probably have to take mine in hand when I get home.

The thought of beating off didn't appeal to Larry; he always felt guilty afterward. Maybe he'd go talk to Father Haskell about it; see what the Priest had to say.

He had tried, back in the truck, to guide Joan's hand to his erection. But she wouldn't cooperate. She would let him feel her breasts, but only through her brassiere, not under it. Well, he had tried. Everybody said that Joan was the original Ice Queen. No way you'll get the pants off her, boy. She won't even let you feel "down there." And Larry would have liked to have felt "down there." He had never felt any girl's "down there."

He never would.

They walked further in the night, further from the truck, deeper into the unknown that stretched in front of them—waiting. Two young people, full of life, kidding each other, laughing, talking of the summer ahead of them. A summer neither of them would know.

"You will go out with me, won't you, Joan? I mean, again? You're not going to let—you know, what happened tonight—I mean, you're not mad at me?"

"Of course not, Larry. Sure I'll go out with you. You're nice—I like you. You're not like the others; what they've become lately. Just ask when you want to go out."

They walked into the night, stopping at a tall fence. No trespassing signs bolted onto the chain-link.

"This is Tyson's Lake, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yeah. Supposed to be deep caves in there. You wanna see them?"

She hesitated for just a moment. "Sure! Let's go."

They climbed the tall fence, Larry helping her get unstuck when her jeans snagged on a piece of wire, ripping off a small piece of denim. They walked up a small hill, stopping at the crest to catch their breath. Below them, a small lake glistened in the night. A pearl in a cup of blackness.

"It's beautiful," she whispered. "I've never seen anything like it." She tugged at his hand. "Come on, I want to go down there."

Larry pulled her back. "I don't know, Joan. People say funny things happen around here. Nobody *ever* goes down there."

She laughed at him, not meaning to hurt his pride. Not knowing she was bringing out the boyish macho in him. "Oh, come on! You don't believe all that old gossip, do you?"

He laughed. "Yeah, you're right. Let's go."

They walked down the hill to the lake. Two young people, unafraid, unaware of the silent evil watching them. Unaware of the heavy breathing and the dripping of hot, stinking saliva from yellowed fangs. "What is that smell?" she asked. "Yuck! It's gruesome."

The odor wrinkled Larry's nose. "Something dead, I guess. Maybe a cow."

"Come on."

They ran toward the lake. Suddenly, the night seemed to grow darker around them, engulfing them. The young people sensed evil around them. Sensed it, but could not put it into words. They were still full of innocence, still too young, and they would not grow much older.

The moment of evil-sensing passed. A spirit of adventure filled them as they looked at the dark stand of timber a few hundred yards from them.

"Where's all the caves that's supposed to be around here?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I just always heard they were here. I've never seen them. I've never been out here before," he admitted.

"This place is not as big as I thought it was."

"Yeah. Maybe a hundred and fifty acres, I guess. 'Bout that. But it musta cost old man Sorenson a bundle to put up a chain-link fence around this much land."

"How much?"

"I don't know, Joan."

Small red eyes watched them from the timber. Huge hairy arms hung down, clawed fingers working in anticipation. One of the intruders was female, they sensed that. A breeder, perhaps. The other they would eat.

The Beasts knew only survival. They must survive, for He was near. He would soon loose them.

Come closer, the Beasts willed.

The teenagers left the silver lake. They walked slowly toward the dark timber.

"Larry? That smell is making me sick. I don't want to go in there. I want to go home."

"Aw, come on! Don't get all spooked-out. Nothing to be scared of. I'm here." Maybe this is the way, he thought.

Maybe if something happened, then I could protect her from—whatever.

He fantasized himself saving her from—it.

Outlaws, maybe. He would beat them up. Then Joan would kiss him and maybe give him some. He got a slight erection just thinking about it.

She stopped their movement and his erotic thoughts with an arm across his chest. "You hear something?"

They listened. Whatever Joan had heard—if anything—was silent. Then a low growl reached them.

"Yeah," Larry said. "A dog, I think."

A twig snapped behind them, spinning them around, hearts beating heavily in their chests. They could see nothing. But the smell—it was awful.

"Smells like someone who hasn't bathed in a long time," she said. "Or maybe never."

Larry forced a laugh. "Aw, come on, Joan. You've been seeing too many monster movies. Maybe it's The Thing?"

"You jumped, too," she reminded him. Her breath was ragged.

Her heart was beating too fast. "Don't talk about monsters, Larry. Not out here. Okay?"

"Okay, I'm sorry. But I just jumped 'cause you did, that's all."

"How far back to the truck?"

"Bout a mile and a half, I guess." Shit! she wants to go home. I'll never get any. I'll be a virgin all my life.

"I want to go home, Larry. Right now!" Edges of panic in her voice.

A snarl from the timber, just a few yards in front of them. A snap of heavy jaws.

She grabbed his hand. "Come on, Larry—Run!"

A scream touched them, a howling. A shriek of such hideousness it forced all thoughts of sex from Larry's mind. Together, the young couple ran blindly through the night.

A snarl in front of them, a thing looming up from the night. It roared at them, reaching for them, its breath fouling the air. They changed directions, running toward the timber. Branches whipped at them, cutting flesh as they ran, panic driving them deeper into the dark timber.

Larry screamed, jerking the girl to a stop. "Oh, my God!" he pointed.

Grotesque figures surrounded them, encircling them, eyes red and wild. Fanged jaws dripped stinking drool. The

creatures reached for the young people. Larry peed his shorts.

Joan wailed her terror as the creatures pawed at her, touching her private places. She was too numb to run. This one, they knew was a breeder. They ripped the clothing from her, leaving her naked. The creatures moved about the teenagers, touching them, prodding them with sharp-clawed fingers. Breeding could wait for a time; they were hungry.

One of the creatures moved, swiftly sinking its teeth into Larry's neck, severing the jugular, loving the taste of blood.

Joan whirled around, running out of the timber, two snarling, snapping Beasts after her. She ran naked past the small lake, terror making her strong. She ran faster than she ever imagined she could.

She stumbled, falling over a root, bruising her knees. The Beasts were on her, trying to drag her back. She screamed, rolled to her feet, and raced into the night.

The Beasts were large, longer-legged, but they were clumsy, and Joan was driven by blind fear, the adrenalin pumping through her. She gained on them as she raced up the hill, out-distancing them as she ran down the other side. She scrambled over the fence, cutting her legs, then dropped to the other side, running for her life, never looking back.

The Beasts had stopped at the fence, watching the female run into the night. There was disappointment in their low growls. They could not venture past this fence—not yet. To pursue her, they knew, meant the chance of meeting man on the dirt road less than two miles away, and they had been forbidden to leave this area.

The Beasts loped back to the timber, hoping the others had left them some meat. They had not been awake long, only a few weeks, and they had been asleep for a long, long time. Years. He had awakened them, and the Beasts were tired of eating fish and berries. They wanted raw meat, and the sweet, hot, salty taste of blood.

In the timber, they found only scraps of meat, and they were angry. The pair snarled over the scraps and bones, fighting for a moment before realizing the Master would not like them to quarrel. They quieted, then shared what was left, snapping the bones, sucking the marrow.

When they had finished, they dragged the bloody clothing of the boy and the girl to a hole in the ground, deep in the timber. The Beasts slipped into the opening of the deep cave, traveling far into the earth. They did not fear the darkness—they knew it well. They had lived here for a long time.

Thousands of years. They had walked this earth long before what is now called man came to this place. But when man came, both before and after the flood, he had hunted them. The Beasts had been hunted with everything from stone axes to guns. But they had—thousands of years before—joined forces with the Master, and He protected them, awakening them from time to time. Now, He had awakened them again.

The Beasts passed one of the ever-awake sentries, growling a greeting, then slipped deeper into the bowels of the earth.

Joan managed to start the truck, killing the engine several times in her hysteria. She was cold, and there was not even a jacket in the truck to cover her nakedness. Her hysteria moved into shock as she bounced down the rough dirt road, driving too fast. She cried with relief when she spotted the sheriff's patrol.

The deputy licked his lips as his eyes traveled over her naked body. He patted her on the shoulder, covered her trembling body with his jacket, and led her to his car. She slid in next to his partner, very conscious of the short jacket and her body. The seat was cold on her bare rump.

"I'll drive the truck," his partner said. "Follow you."

A mile down the road, the deputy turned to the right.

"Aren't we going the wrong way?" Joan asked.

"Short cut," the deputy said.

He drove to an old fishing camp in the back country, near a lake in the Bad Lands. There, ignoring her screaming, the men took turns raping her.

Just before dawn, while Joan lay sobbing on the dirty floor, a car pulled up outside the shack. "Walter," a deputy said, looking out the boarded-up window.

"Sink the truck in the lake," the acting-sheriff told them, his eyes taking in the lushness of the teenager's body. He knelt down and squeezed a soft breast.

"No!" Joan screamed. "Please help me!"

Walter beat her into submission, then raped her. When he had finished, he tied her securely, put her in the back seat of his car, and drove to Tyson's Lake, dumping her over the fence. He backed off, up the hill, watching the Beasts lope toward the girl. They dragged her into the timber. Her screaming lasted a long time as the Beasts took turns mounting her.

Then the timber was silent.

Walter knew the girl had become one of Them, a rapid

metamorphosis taking place after she had been bitten on the neck, the infection spreading through her. Walter knew this because the Master's agent had told him how it was done. Then he had taken the acting-sheriff to meet the Beasts.

That encounter had been one of the less pleasant experiences of Walter Addison's life.

Addison drove back to Whitfield, to his apartment. He showered, shaved, put on a clean uniform, and went to his office, waiting for the call from anxious parents. He was very solicitous as he talked with the parents of Joan and Larry, promising them he would do everything he could to find the missing kids.

After hanging up the phone, he looked at a couple of his deputies. They all wore medallions under their uniform shirts. "Some kids disappeared last night," he said. "Parents are all worked up about it."

And they all laughed.

The corruption that almost completely destroyed the town of Whitfield did not occur swiftly. Rather, like a slow-moving cancer, it worked with stealth, insidiously spreading, until the knife could but momentarily halt the propagation, not cure it. Only death would check the dispersion of evil.

The purulence-filled cavity of disgust leaked over into the light one day, dribbling just enough filth to alarm one man and one young woman who loved that man. To jog their sense of outrage. To move them into action.

The minister, Sam Balon, and the woman, Jane Ann Burke.

The forces of evil must have screamed their hatred when Sam began to gather facts, spreading them out in his mind, sorting them into neat little piles of truth.

Most men do not know their limits, their capabilities, their own minds. Sam Balon did. The devil despises the Sam Balon's of the world, and would prefer to stay away from them.

Sam was no lace-pants preacher. He'd been tested many times, and was as tough as wang-leather, understanding the temptations of this world. He had tasted the bittersweetness of evil, and knew that all humankind was susceptible to enticement.

The devil is wary of these kinds of ministers. For these types of men are tough. The Sam Balon types, upon seeing that prayer will not work, will ball their fists and come in swinging. This type of minister does not set himself up as a paragon of virtue, for all to follow their example. They know they are human.

The Sam Balon's of Christian ministry are rare breeds. They enjoy a cold beer after mowing the lawn. They might smoke a pipe or a few cigarettes a day. They enjoy wine with the evening meal. They understand changing times, moving with the flow, not against it. They are not pulpit-pounders or screamers. The young people usually like them.

The devil hates them. For as attractive as Satan makes sin, the Sam Balon's are almost always impervious to it. They cannot be possessed, so they must be destroyed. And the devil sits and scratches his head, wondering—How?

Satan cannot destroy the Sam Balon's at the outset: that

would anger God, and the devil knows only too well the wrath of God. Satan has felt God's boot on his butt too many times, and that has made him wary. So the devil must work quietly; he must work *around* the Sam Balon's, hoping the man will not discover the evil until it is too late—until the man is alone, almost defenseless.

In Whitfield, the devil almost succeeded.

"I guess the kids just took off," Walter Addison told the mothers of the missing teenagers. "They will do that, you know. We've had an APB—that's an All Points Bulletin—out for more than a month."

"I know you're doing all you can, Walter," the mother of the missing girl said.

"Well," the sheriff said, standing with his cowboy hat in his hand, "I hate to say this, but kids do funny things nowadays. I personally think it's all that rock and roll music they've taken to listening to. It's got *something* to do with it. I just don't know, ladies. There is gettin' to be so much sex in the songs and in the movies. No tellin' what it'll be like twenty years from now." He shook his head, a humble man, overwhelmed by the enormity of it all. "We'll keep trying, ladies, I can promise you that."

Sam had stood listening. Walter had ignored him, refusing to speak to him.

Crap! the minister thought, watching the sheriff walk away. Pure undiluted cow chips.

Sam said goodbye to the ladies and then stood for a moment on the corner of the street.

You're a liar, sheriff! Sam mused. You said you called the FBI, and the FBI came in and looked around, investigating a possible kidnapping. But the FBI never came in here, never questioned anyone, because you never called them. And I'd like to know why.

I know they didn't come in here, sheriff, because Joan was a member of my church, and they didn't question me. Larry worked part-time for Chester, and they didn't question him. Larry belonged to the Episcopal Church, and they didn't question Glen Haskell. The principal of the high school, Bill Mathis, said they talked with him, in his office at school. But Jane Ann said the day they were supposed to have talked with him, he was out of town, at a meeting in Lincoln. So add that all up, partner, and that makes you a liar, and it makes Bill Mathis a liar.

But why?

And why all the recent grave robbing? Where are the bodies? And there is something very strange going on at Glower's Funeral Home. I've heard whispers. Even Doctor King is suspicious, although he won't talk with me about it. Not yet.

And the people in this town. They've become . . . different, somehow. What's going on, Sheriff?

"You're deep in thought, Sam,?" the voice jarred him out of his musings. He looked into the violet eyes of Jane Anne Burke, and a warm feeling spread over him.

"Yes, I am," he smiled at her. "Or was."

She looked up at her minister. He was almost a foot taller than her five four. A big man, Sam Balon, who did not in any way fit the minister stereotype.

Sam looked more like a mercenary; a soldier of fortune; a pirate. Dark brown hair, almost always unruly. Massive shoulders and barrel chest. Heavily muscled arms. Huge wrists. There were scars on his knuckles and two faint scars on his face, one just above his right eye, the other on his chin. She'd heard he got one scar in a barroom brawl in Kansas City, the other scar in a free-for-all in a bar in Korea. Sam had emerged from that war a much-decorated hero, but he never talked about it.

She'd heard that Sam had been part of of an experimental combat unit in Korea. Something called Special Forces—guerrilla fighters.

Jane Ann was in love with her minister, and she knew he knew. But she was very careful never to be alone with him. If they were seen together, it was always in public places.

"How is Michelle?" she asked.

"Just fine."

That was a lie and they both knew it. Michelle, Jane Ann thought, is a bitch! The whole town knew Sam and his wife were having problems. They didn't even sleep together. Lately, it seemed lots of people in Whitfield were having problems, mostly with their faith. Church attendance was way down.

"Ministers aren't supposed to tell fibs, Sam," she gently scolded him.

"Ministers aren't human," he returned the smile, thinking, Oh, boy, are we human. Jane Ann, if I weren't a minister . . .

An old lady hobbled by on arthritic legs, greeting them. "Jane Ann. Reverend Balon."

He smiled and nodded.

Sam did not like being called Reverend. He maintained there was only one Reverend person to ever walk the earth, and He had been crucified. Call him Sam, call him preacher, call him brother, but please don't call him Reverend.

Walter Addison drove by, and Jane Ann watched her minister's eyes narrow as they followed the sheriff's car down the street. Addison had not waved at them. It was almost as if he was deliberately avoiding them.

"He was a member of our church for as long as I can remember," Jane Ann said. "Then suddenly he stopped attending. Strange."

"Yes. it is—among other strange things happening in Whitfield." Sam swung his gaze to Jane Ann "I'd better be going. Got to get back home."

Back to your slut wife! Oh, Sam, everybody in town knows she's running around on you. "I'll see you Sunday, Sam."

"Yes. Fine." He started to walk away, hesitated, and then said, "Jane Ann?"

"Yes, Sam?" she almost called him darling.

"Be careful."

"That's an odd thing to say. Why did you say that?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Forget it, Janey."

She watched him walk away, arms swinging by his side. A huge, powerful man. A very handsome man. Not the pretty-boy type; the rugged type. Not at all a follower of fashion, Sam Balon. he wore what pleased him, not some men's fashion designer. This was crew-cut or flat-top country. But Sam wore his hair longer than most. Chester Stokes had told her that Sam was once asked about the length of his hair—that it was out of style. The man doing the asking had said it with a smirk. Sam's reply was, "If you don't like it, jump in and try to change it, partner. Watch ihis ex-doggie bite."

Not your average preacher type, Sam Balon.

Sam had turned more than one woman's head, causing them to think very unchurchly thoughts of the minister.

And I'm one of them, Jane Ann smiled.

Fork County is one of the largest counties in America—larger than some states. Thousands of square miles of sand hills, ridges, Bad Lands, valleys, hollows, and hundreds of small lakes. Some of the finest timber in the state can be found in Fork County. The land is dotted with cottonwoods and box elders. Very little farming in Fork County, mostly cattle ranching in the rolling hills and plains.

There are only four towns in the entire county, the largest

being Whitfield. Fork County is huge, and sparsely populated. If one wanted to hide, or be alone, or perpetrate an evil, Fork County would be ideal. Not because of the people, but because of its aloneness, its isolation.

Whitfield sits almost in the direct center of Fork County, and while its chief law enforcement agent is called Sheriff, he is really a sub-sheriff, the elected sheriff having his offices in Atwood, some sixty miles away.

Whitfield is not an easy place to reach; it has few visitors. One road in, one road out. State roads. There are several winding county roads, but most of them lead nowhere, or in a circle, and at times are impassable.

A native of Fork once told a weary salesman who was attempting to get to Whitfield, "You can't get there from here, partner. You got to go somewhere else to start."

He was only half joking.

Fork County.

Standard number of churches in Whitfield, standard mix of religion as found in any small town. The young people leave as soon as they can, unless they plan to ranch with their fathers. Whitfield has no industry. The ranches have passed from great-grandfather to grandfather to father to son. Old brands. Foreign investment in Fork County is nil.

Only one Jewish family in Whitfield, Miles Lansky and his wife Doris. The Lansky's walk a fine line. They live in a community full of cowboys and out-doorsmen. A community full of the Plains State's version of the Southern Good Ole Boy. A less refined term is Redneck.

"Them Jews is funny, you know that, boy? They ain't like us."

A statement that surely brings great joy to the Jews.

Miles owns a very profitable department store. His best friend is Sam Balon.

In Fork, cowboys still ride horses on round-up, still carry guns. The six-guns, though, are usually carried in the saddlebags, not belted around the waist. Quick drawing is something that can now be seen at the County Fair. Amuses the kiddies.

Sport. Occasionally, someone emulating Wes Hardin will shoot off his toe. Amuses the adults.

The one newspaper in this part of Fork, the *Fork County Crusader*, is conservative Republican, owned by its editor, Wade Thomas. The newspaper was passed on to him by his father, and to him by his father, who came to what is now

Whitfield in the 1860s. The newspaper is published weekly, serving the eastern half of Fork County. Due to a range war in the late 1890s, the western half of Fork does not get along with the eastern half. Memories die hard in Fork County.

The *Crusader* is a good, solid, small-town newspaper.

Whitfield had, until recently, a radio station. The airwaves would alternate painfully between the nasal honkings of country music and the primal gruntings of the newly discovered rock and roll.

Sam, a lover of the classics, did not listen to the local station. It was not that Sam did not like some country and some rock and roll; for some reason, listening to the local station made him very nervous. He assumed it was only his imagination and thought no more of it.

In June of 1958, the radio station abruptly went out of business and off the air, to the sorrow of many and the almost total relief of the few music lovers in Whitfield.

The *Crusader* made a few polite inquiries about the archaeologists working around what was always presumed to be an ancient Indian burial ground and the often laughed-about home of some kind of monster. Nervous laughter. Almost everyone in Whitfield believed it was a burial ground; almost no one believed it was the home of any type of monster. Still, though . . .

No one knew the site of the Digging was linked to natural tunnels to the stand of timber at Tyson's Lake.

"It's weird out there, partner," is the standard when one asks about the strange formation of rocks out in the Bad Lands. "It's hard to get to and there ain't nothing out there when you get there. Stupid circle. Indian mumbo jumbo. Big deal. Now, I ain't been out there in years. I ain't goin', either."

No one goes "out there" after dark. Very few go "out there" during the day. Even before the archaeologists put up a fence to keep people away from the circle, no one went "out there." Down through the years there have been reports of deaths "out there." Rumors of horrible creatures "out there."

Yes, Whitfield and that part of Fork County has had its monsters for hundreds of years—according to stories handed down. The legend is they are fanged and clawed creatures, with enormous strength and a vile stench about them.

Scary.

But no one has seen them. And, no, the creatures have never been known to venture into Whitfield.

Not yet.

The people of Whitfield and that part of Fork don't like to speak of the monsters—and don't. It is a close community, and outsiders are carefully scrutinized before being accepted into the fold—if they ever are.

The Project Director of the Dig, Doctor (Ph.d) Black Wilder, had refused to allow any pictures to be taken of the Dig, or of himself, or of any of his people. That irritated Wade Thomas. Wade, a typical reporter, took some shots, anyway. They didn't develop. Bad film, he concluded, and put the Digging out of his mind.

Really, the archaeologists made for pretty dull copy. Wilder had insisted upon using words so technical Wade didn't know what he was talking about, and if he didn't understand them, he knew perfectly well his readers wouldn't.

But something about the Dig nagged at Wade. Something—intangible—bothered him. Something about Wilder bothered him, too. And his workers—they rarely came to town. When Wade tried to talk with them, they answered him in monosyllables. They were not rude in their brevity, they just didn't have a damn thing to say. They would smile, nod their head, and walk off.

"Arrogant bunch of eggheads!" Wade muttered.

But if they were a bit strange—to small-town philosophy—they were well-behaved. They bought their supplies in Whitfield, paid in cash, were polite—standoffish, some said—and caused no trouble for the local law.

It was Sam who noticed they all wore the same kind of medallion around their necks. And they did not attend church—none of them.

But Sam kept his suspicions to himself.

And Wade kept his to himself.

And Jane Ann kept hers to herself.

All of them almost waited too long before bringing their suspicions to the attention of what few friends they had left.

THREE

The archaeologist, at first, viewed the stone and the writings upon it with mildly concealed humor, believing some of his fellow workers were having a joke at his expense. But when he carbon-tested the stone and the edge of the cutting in the tablet, his smile faded abruptly. The stone tablet was thousands of years old. He double-checked his findings. When he finished the second testing, the young man sat in silence, smoking his pipe, looking at the tablet, his eyes not quite believing what was in front of him.

"Impossible," he said.

He then began the task of translating the ancient symbols cut deeply—and perfectly—into the stone. When the translation was complete, the young man shivered as he read the words. He simply could not believe what he was reading.

But there it was, in front of him, on the workbench in his small trailer/lab. Again, he checked his findings. The symbols cut into the stone were perfectly formed. They could not have been cut with any tool known to exist five thousand years ago—or more. Then, how?

The supernatural entered his mind. He shook his head at that. "No, that's not possible."

Or, was it?

He read again the translation. HE WALKS AMONG YOU. THE MARK OF THE BEAST IS PLAIN. BELIEVE IN HIM. ONCE TOUCHED, FOREVER HIS. THE KISS OF LIFE AND DEATH.

What did it mean?

A cool breeze blew through the open window of the trailer. The young man shivered.

Under the words cut into the stone, a strange marking of some sort. The young man studied the marking. It was very complicated, yet somehow familiar. Where had he seen it? He remembered. A medallion—yes, that was it! He had seen the markings on a medallion. But where had he seen it?

He took a magnifying glass, studying the markings more closely. A sensation of pure terror overcame him.

He felt his lips pull back in revulsion. Under very close inspection, the marking was—horrible. Despicable. A man/creature, but yet, so much more, cut with such fine detail. A scene of debauchment, of total human depravity and ugly corruption.

The archaeologist covered the tablet with a piece of canvas. Just doing that made him feel better. But the scene cut into the stone haunted him. There had been people in that scene, humans, but they seemed more animal than human. He threw back the canvas to study the scene. Disgusting! He felt ill. The scene depicted an orgy, yet so much more than that. It went against everything the young man had been taught. Men with men; women with women; adults with children. He had never seen such detail cut into stone. In the very back of the cutting, a human sacrifice. Beyond that, a crucifixion.

He covered the stone tablet with the canvas, and, saying nothing to any of his fellow workers, drove into Whitfield. He'd been raised in the Christian church, but had not attended services in years. Today, though, he felt he needed to speak with a minister.

At the parsonage, he introduced himself to Sam Balon. He found himself liking the big, rough-looking minister with a rose tattooed on his left forearm.

Over coffee, the young man suddenly felt himself unable to speak of the tablet. Unable to speak because the minister's wife had entered the room, and the young man knew, then, where he had seen the medallion with the evil markings. Of course! It was worn by his fellow-workers—all of them, and by the project director, Dr. Wilder. Wilder, it was said, was humping a local woman. This woman. The minister's wife!

The woman looked at him with eyes that seemed to burn into his brain, silencing his tongue. The medallion around her neck seemed to glow with life. He could see the medallion and what it depicted—all the evil and debasement—why couldn't the minister?

Because he's not looking for anything evil in his wife, the young man answered his own question.

He was both fascinated and frightened by the power the woman seemed to hold over him. When he met her eyes, they seemed to control his thoughts, his tongue.

He chatted with the couple for a few minutes, then

left. It was only while driving back to the Dig that he realized he did not know where he'd been, could recall nothing of his visit to the minister's home, or of seeing the man's wife. He did not recall the woman walking him to his car, he had no recognition of her kissing him on the mouth. He could not know he had been marked.

ONCE TOUCHED, FOREVER HIS. THE KISS OF LIFE AND DEATH.

The sun cast brilliant light through the open windows of the small trailer/lab at the Dig. The stone tablet, uncovered, seemed to glow with life, somehow mocking the young man.

"This is ridiculous!" he said aloud, rising from his stool. "A rock is a rock. A stone cannot mock a living person."

But mere words spoken aloud could not calm him.

Tim was not overly religious, but he did believe in God—and Satan. The young man felt a shiver of fear race through him, touching his spine, moving upward to settle in his brain. The lab seemed to become very stuffy. It was difficult for Tim to breathe. And his memory—something was wrong with his memory. He could remember finding the tablet . . . yesterday; yes, it had been yesterday. But what of yesterday afternoon? He could not remember.

Looking at the stone tablet and its markings, Tim suddenly felt he had opened the doors to Hell, and could hear the cries of the damned and smell the stink of burning flesh. He felt he could sense the agony of the forever condemned.

"Calm yourself," he said. "Control yourself. There is an explanation for everything, remember?" Well, almost, he thought ruefully. "Don't forget, you're a scientist."

His words did nothing to calm him.

He poured a glass of water from the pitcher in the small refrigerator, drank it, then sat down on the stool in front of his workbench. He glared at the tablet.

The tablet glared back at him.

Tim realized, although the day was cool, he was beginning to sweat. His face was damp with perspiration, his shirt sticking to him. He reached out to touch the tablet, jerking his hand back as his fingers touched the stone.

The tablet had burned him!

"Goddamn you!" he cursed the stone. He looked at his fingertips in numb shock. His fingertips were raw from blistering.

The stone was glowing, pulsing with life, almost as a heartbeat from within.

Tim was suddenly ill, fighting back sickness that threatened to erupt from his belly.

He looked at the stone. It had ceased its throbbing.

"Ugly," Tim said. "Profane. The stone is evil.

He glanced at a hammer on his workbench and somehow, as if spoken to by a voice from afar, what he must do—and do it quickly.

No! a voice screamed from inside his brain, stilling his hand as he reached for the hammer.

Do it! another voice cried, as if in great agony. The voice seemed to be speaking from a great distance. Destroy the stone, the voice screamed. You must destroy the tablet!

The voices battled within his head as Tim sat on the stool, listening to the utterances within him. One voice seemed to be almost pure in its vocalizing. The other voice was very evil.

The voices fought, long and hard and loudly. Tim found the strength to reach once more for the hammer. Something with great force knocked him from his stool. He clawed his way to his feet, his head ringing with sound. His hand closed around the handle of the hammer.

The voices ceased their battling as the trailer door opened. Sweat dripped from the young archaeologist, and his body was strangely exhausted. He looked toward the open door.

Black Wilder, the project director, stood looking at him, smiling. His shirt was open to the waist, the sunlight bouncing off a medallion hanging from a chain around his neck.

The stone tablet began its pulsing, seeming to draw life from the medallion. The pure voice in Tim's head screamed just once, then faded away into a silent void. A piece of a long-forgotten sermon entered Tim's mind: God rules the Heavens, but Satan rules the earth.

Tim tried to scream, but no sound came from his throat.

"What were you going to do with that hammer, Tim?"

Tim's voice returned with a gasp. "I—ah—was going to chip away a piece of that stone, sir."

"With a carpenter's hammer?" the older man laughed. If Tim had known just how old Wilder was, he would have died from fright. "Now, Tim, really!" Wilder's eyes burned into Tim's. "That's a very interesting tablet. Find it at this Dig?"

"Yes, sir. I—ah—was just about to call you."

"Were you?" Wilder's tone was doubting.

Tim moved away from the workbench, away from Wilder and the glowing medallion. "What is that thing, sir?" he glanced at the stone.

Wilder smiled. "Why didn't you call me yesterday, Tim? When you found the tablet. Why did you visit that minister in Whitfield—Balon?"

Tim's memory came rushing back, flooding his brain with remembrances. He recalled the minister's wife, Michelle, and her burning eyes. He remembered his mixed emotions as her lips touched his mouth. "Why are you answering a question with a question, sir?"

Doctor Wilder's smile was very unpleasant. "You've never liked it here, have you, Tim?"

"I wouldn't say that."

Wilder's smile was all-knowing. The medallion glowed. The stone tablet pulsed.

"I—uh—like it fine, sir. I—just can't seem to make any friends with your people, that's all. Most of them aren't even civil with me. I think they dislike me for some reason, and I don't know why. I wasn't wanted on this Dig, I know that, and I'm sorry I raised such a fuss about going, now."

"You haven't given us a chance, Tim." Wilder moved closer to the young man. "You know that's true. Why. you've only attended one of our talk sessions for the new people."

"That's something else. What has happened to the new embers. We were friendly when we first arrived. Now they won't even speak to me. I don't like your talk sessions, sir. I don't like the way you and your people scoff at God. And why is it I'm always sent to Lincoln on Fridays. I get the feeling you don't want me around here on Friday nights. Why?"

Wilder laughed at him; an ugly laugh. "Such a pious

young man, Tim. And such a suspicious one. Too bad."

Tim was suddenly angry. "You tell me what this is, Doctor Wilder. You tell me what's going on. This is not a Dig—most of your people don't know a dog's hind foot from a dinosaur dropping. I've never seen such careless digging in my life!"

"Are you doubting my reputation as an archaeologist?"

"No, sir. Just your explanation for being here. We've uncovered nothing of any importance here, and no evidence to suggest there is anything of any importance."

"Oh, my, yes, Tim." Wilder's voice was soft, "And you've found it."

The trailer became hot—stiflingly so. The stone tablet began to pulse as Wilder moved toward Tim. The medallion glowed. Tim began screaming as Wilder reached for him. The man's eyes were wild, burning with the same intensity as the medallion and the tablet and had Mrs. Balon's eyes at the parsonage.

Terror washed over Tim. "Leave me alone!" he screamed.

Wilder touched him on the arm, the touch searing Tim's flesh through the cloth of his shirt.

Tim screamed in agony. He screamed for a long time, the pain moving through him in ever-heightening waves of torment. In his tortured mind, he imagined the small room filled with demons, Wilder the host demon. The trailer filled with stinking smoke, engulfing Tim in a mist of evil-smelling fetor.

Tim lost all sense of date and time. He knew only his horrible pain, wondering why this was happening to him. Then, as the mist cleared, Tim found himself naked, his clothing torn from him, not by hands, but by claws. Filthy claws. His agony was unbearable, but somehow he could not escape it, his mind refusing him the luxury of unconsciousness. He was dragged outside to the ground. He screamed, but no friend came to his aid.

Claws ripped his flesh as the people of the Digging surrounded him, tearing at him, their eyes burning with hate and evil.

At a word from Wilder, the clawing ceased. The man leaned close to Tim, his breath reeking, offending Tim's face. The young man looked up into eyes as old as evil, as old as time.

"Won't you join us, Tim?" Wilder asked. "You can. Just

repeat the oath. Say this: God is filth. God is shit. Reject Him!"

"No!" Tim screamed.

"Reject Him," Wilder urged. "It's so easy. Join us. Accept the Prince of Darkness, the blood of the Believer. Let the Lord of Flies fill your life with all the pleasures you have but dreamed of."

"NO!"

Wilder hissed his outrage at this rejection, spittle from his mouth dripping on Tim's face. Again and again he urged Tim to blaspheme his God. The young man would not deny his God.

"Then you will die!" Wilder stood over him.

"Oh, my God—my Savior!" Tim cried out his pain. "Help me."

The others began laughing as they danced around the young man, their tongues spewing blasphemy. The sunlit day grew darker, gray clouds moving restlessly overhead.

"Where is your God, now?" Wilder laughed profanely. "You call on Him, but He does not hear you. Are you sure He even exists?"

"He hears me," Tim said, his faith growing as his body grew weaker. "He is real."

"Then where is He?"

"Everywhere," Tim spoke through his pain.

"Then perhaps He will hear you tonight," Wilder smiled. "When we cut out your heart. But you will suffer much before the knife ends it." Tim began screaming.

It was a Friday.

FOUR

Sam Balon, minister of the First Christian Church of Whitfield, woke from a deep and very troubled sleep. He no longer put out his hand to touch the far side of the bed. He knew his wife would not be there. She had not been there for months. She would be asleep in the bedroom on the far side of the parsonage, with heavy, black drapes pulled tightly shut, like shrouds, the bedroom door locked.

Once, weeks back, Sam had peeked into her bedroom when she had forgotten to lock the door. The heavy drapes were pulled tight. The room held a bad odor. Always a sun-lover, Michelle now avoided the sun, sleeping all day whenever she could. Sam had laid in his bed at night, many times, listening to his wife prowling the house in the darkness. Several times she had softly opened the door to his room, to stand looking at him, believing him asleep. Through slitted eyes, Sam had seen the medallion around her neck catch the light from the moon, winking at him. Once, he recalled, Michelle had hissed at him from the bedroom door.

She had not been a wife to him in months, domestically or sexually.

Once, several weeks back, when she had attempted to kiss him, Sam had jerked away from her. He still did not know why he had done that. His actions had enraged her.

On this early morning, in the summer of 1958, Sam had, as he had done so many times in the past several weeks, wakened soaked with sweat, his pajamas sticking uncomfortably to him. He had fought and struggled his way out of sleep—a sleep filled with nightmares of human sacrifice, devil worship, and orgies involving the most unspeakable of human deviations. And those creatures! Something straight out of a horror movie. But they were somehow familiar to Sam. He had seen or read about them, somewhere. But he could not pin it down.

Sam's restless sleep and troubled dreaming had tired him, leaving him feeling he had slept only a couple of hours, instead of eight. He had been experiencing these awful nightmares for weeks, and he could not understand why.

He had read no books nor seen any movies on devil worship or the supernatural—nothing to trigger such dreams.

There had been no discussion of such things among his friends.

Friends? Sam's smile was bitter as he lay awake on the rumpled sheets. My once large circle of friends has certainly dwindled over the past weeks. Again . . . why?

He had read no books nor seen any movies on devil worship or the supernatural—nothing to trigger such dreams. There had been no discussion of such things among his friends. Friends? Sam's smile was bitter as he lay awake on the rumpled sheets. My once large circle of friends has certainly dwindled over the past weeks. Again . . . why?

But he did not consider his personal dreaming or his loss of a few fair-weather friends important enough to bother God with it in prayer. Yet.

But something was wrong in Whitfield.

He thought of Tim Bennett, the young archaeologist who had come to see him. He had been distraught that day, but had refused to say why. And he had not been back. When Sam had gone to the Dig site looking for him, he was told the young man had quit, gone back home, in the east.

Sam felt the man was lying to him. But why would he lie?

The preacher sat on the edge of the bed, in the dim light of predawn, and thought of his wife, probably sprawled in sleep in her black-draped room. Sam had not mentioned his dreams to her—why bother? The two of them had not shared a conversation of any substance in months. They had not shared anything in months.

Sam fought back the image of Jane Ann. Increasingly, she had the annoying habit of entering his thoughts at the most inopportune times and places. Alone in his bed. In the shower.

He had to smile. A preacher I may be, but I'm still a man, and Jane Ann is a very lovely woman.

He shook his head, clearing his thoughts of Jane Ann.

Sam had toyed with the idea that someone—God, perhaps—was trying to tell him something with these dreams. He had quickly rejected that idea.

Sam rose and padded softly to the kitchen. He poured a large glass of orange juice, drank it. then rubbed the cold glass against his forehead. He sat down at the table, weary from his hours of tossing and turning, fighting the dreams. He tried to think; his mind was a jumble of confusion.

Sam knew he and Michelle had been happy in their marriage. At first. At least he thought they had been.

Childless, but content. But now, reviewing the past years, Sam could pick the marriage apart in retrospect. Their social life had never been very good; women seemed not to like or trust Michelle. And, he recalled, his mouth brassy with the knowledge, he knew she had been unfaithful to him many times. All the pieces fit in their proper places: the half-truths, the open lies he had caught her in, but never told her he knew.

And why, Sam reflected, would Michelle never see a doctor? Sam had gone, suspecting he was sterile. He was not. Michelle refused to go, becoming angry when he suggested it.

Sam thought back. He had known her . . . how long? Six years. And she had never been sick. Not once. She had never complained of cramps during her monthly time. Never had a cold. Never had a fever. Nothing. It was almost as if she were not . . . human.

And why had she been so insistent upon them coming here to Whitfield? He had other offers of more money, bigger churches. But no, she had thrown a temper tantrum when he suggested another church.

Why?

He had no answer.

Again, as he had many times before, Sam thought of the Catholic priest, Father Dubois. Dubois had never liked Michelle, nor she him. Sam sensed it. Did the priest know something Sam did not? If so, why didn't he tell him?

Again, the minister had no answer.

Sam could think of no logical explanation. None at all. None that would satisfy him. Sam wanted very much to be angry, but he could not direct his anger. Inward, perhaps? Is it all my fault; all my imagination?

No. No, it's neither my fault nor my imagination. I've done too much soul-searching. Whatever happened between us was not my doing, and there is something wrong here in Whitfield.

He shook his head in disgust, in anger, in frustration, in confusion. Rising, he placed the empty glass in the sink and made a pot of coffee. He moved quietly in the kitchen; a big man, in his mid-thirties.

He looked out the window while waiting for the coffee to make. Almost dawn over the town of Whitfield.

A strange dawn, Sam thought, standing by the sink. Birds should be singing, dogs should be barking, there should be movement of people. But there is nothing except the stillness

of silence. Nothing at all.

Why?

Peripheral vision caught a glimpse of some . . . thing slinking by the side of the house across the street. Not a dog. It was too large for an animal. And it had not moved with the fluidity of an animal. The movements had been jerky. It looked like a man. Sort of.

Sam looked more closely. Whatever it was—if anything—was gone.

Sam was suddenly and unexplainedly very uneasy. There had been something. He had seen it. But what? The house belonged to Max Steiner, and the Steiners had a dog—a Doberman. Why hadn't the dog barked? Perhaps the dog was familiar with . . . whatever it had been?

Sam shook his head in annoyance, feeling he was allowing his imagination to run rampant. Despite that, he again looked toward the Steiner house, remembering something the Episcopal had told him a few weeks before.

"I don't understand it, Sam," Father Haskell had said. "Max and Irene Steiner are devout Christians; good church workers—or used to be. Last month they stopped attending services. No explanation. And they won't see me; won't even allow me in their home. The dog had always been friendly to me, now he snarls and lunges at me when I come around. Sam, it's not just the Steiners—you know that. Church attendance is down town-wide. I don't understand what is happening. Do you?"

No, Sam did not. His own church attendance was down. It was as if some . . . force was pulling members away from God. Pulling them toward—what?

He did not know.

Sam left the kitchen, slipping quietly down the hall to his bedroom, gathering up his clothing. He showered and shaved, then dressed in old, comfortable jeans, pull-on boots, and a shirt slightly worn at the elbows. He fixed his coffee, then walked softly through the house to the front porch. He sat on the steps, sipping his coffee, watching the eastern sky do its magic, working its multicolored change of hues.

Dawn over Whitfield.

The morning was not cool, yet Sam suddenly shivered. A long, hard trembling. The ragged edge of tension touched his mind, narrowing his eyes. He had felt the same sensation in combat—and just before combat—in Korea, and he had learned to trust his instincts. They had saved his life before.

"Saved my life?" Sam muttered. Why did I think that? Do I

believe my life to be in danger?

Maybe.

He sat his cup on the steps. "I think I'll do some prowling," he said aloud.

He did not see the eyes that watched him from across the street. In the Steiner home, the Barlow home, the Piper home. Burning eyes. Evil eyes. He could not hear the heavy breathing.

Not yet.

He backed his car carefully around Michelle's and drove the streets of Whitfield. He did not know what he was looking for; something out of the ordinary, perhaps. Some . . . *thing* that would dispell his suspicions. As he drove, he could not find the elusive Thing.

At full light, Whitfield started showing signs of life. People in bathrobes stepping outside to get the morning paper. People sitting on their front porches sipping the first cup of coffee, smoking the first cigarette of the day. Everything appeared normal. Still, some . . . *thing* was not quite right.

Sam waved at a few of the people. None returned his greeting. He drove past the Conway house. Tom Conway, his wife, and their two children had left the church three weeks ago, offering no explanation as to why. Tom and his wife and kids sat on the front porch of the rambling two-story home. Sam drove slowly past, waving a greeting. The oldest of the kids shot him The Bird, right hand clenched, middle finger rigidly extended. The universal sign of contempt. Up your ass! The man and wife and youngest child, Laurie, laughed.

Sam stopped the car dead in the street, not believing his eyes. The father was caressing his daughter's thigh, his hand shoved up her short robe. The teenager spread her legs further apart, father's hand moving upward.

Tom Conway, Jr. shot the preacher two Birds.

Sam drove on, his face flushed. He had seen it. A father caressing his young daughter. The son popping him Birds. "Young man," Sam muttered, "I would very much like to get out of this car, break off your fingers, and shove them up your—"

He caught himself before his anger got the best of him. Calm down, Sam, he cautioned himself. Just calm down. Aloud, "Excuse me, Lord. But I don't know what is wrong in this town. Something sure is. Won't You help me?"

Nothing happened as Sam drove on down the street. He had to smile. "Well, Balon, what did you expect, flaming

words written across the sky? Perhaps the hand of God to appear and pat you on the shoulder? He hasn't worked that way in over two thousand years. But He did give you a brain—use it!"

Sam could not get the sight of Conway caressing his daughter out of his mind. He had heard rumors of incestuous behavior in Whitfield during the past weeks. He had not wanted to believe the rumors. Now he'd seen it.

Then he realized he was driving down Jane Ann's street, slowing at her small house, pulling in the driveway. "Sam!" he railed at his actions. "You're an idiot!"

He glanced at his watch. Six-thirty. He started to back out of the drive when the screen door opened. Jane Ann stared at him. She looked tired.

She neither told him to come in nor to go away. She merely spoke his name. "Sam."

The minister nodded his head. "Are you all right, Jane Ann?" Why did he ask that?

She shook her head. "No, Sam. I'm not all right."

He cut his engine and walked to her. She stood on the porch, the minister on the front steps, both of them very much aware of the spark that moved between them, looking for something explosive to ignite. Both knew they must be very careful.

"Will you walk around the side of the house with me, Sam?"

They walked, not touching, around to the back. The back door was shattered, pulled from its hinges. A crude picture had been drawn on the bottom half of the door. A naked woman with legs spread wide, exposing the genitalia. JANE ANN printed above the obscene drawing.

It was embarrassing for both of them.

"When did this happen?" Sam asked.

"Last night. I haven't slept since."

"Did you call the police?"

She looked up at him, her eyes flashing dark anger. "Sam, it was the police!"

It was the first time Sam had been in her house in more than a year. When he had sensed her feelings toward him, and his feelings toward her, he'd stopped his visits, thinking it best for both of them.

They stood in the kitchen, looking at each other.

"Let me fix you some breakfast, Sam."

"No, that's not necessary. Coffee will be fine."

"Have you eaten?"

"No—but, I just don't think it would be right."

"Sam, nothing is *right* in this town, and you know it. Sit down, I'll fix breakfast."

He had to admit, it was pleasant, watching Jane Ann prepare breakfast. He sipped his coffee, very good coffee, and watched her move around the small kitchen. Very little wasted motion. Jane Ann was nothing like his wife.

Michelle was tall, five seven, with black hair and eyes of the darkest blue, almost black; her complexion was dark.

Jane Ann was small and blonde, with a very trim figure, unlike Michelle's truly magnificent figure. Although, Sam smiled, no one in his right mind would ever mistake Jane Ann for a boy. Her hair was cut short, framing her face.

She turned, as if sensing the minister's eyes on her, and caught him appraising her. "It never hurts to look, Sam," she said impishly, softening the remark with a smile.

"Only if the man is a minister, or married," he countered.

"You're a minister, yes. But I wouldn't say your marriage was made in Heaven."

He shrugged his reply as she placed his breakfast before him. It was everything he liked, prepared as he liked it. Sam lifted his eyes from the plate.

"Eggs scrambled, with green peppers and onions. Sausage cooked just right. Toast with real butter and strawberry preserves. How did you know this?"

"I know lots of things about you, Sam. I hope those preserves are still good. I put them up last year. I never opened them till now."

He nodded, chewing on a piece of toast.

"Michelle hasn't fixed—" He stopped short, feeling guilty about being here, feeling guilty about speaking disparagingly of his wife.

"—fixed your breakfast in a long time," Jane Ann finished the remark. She kept her eyes on her plate as she spoke. "Or slept with you, either."

Sam chewed his food slowly, looking at the top of her head. "Ugly rumors."

She met his eyes. "They are *not* rumors, Sam. Stop trying to kid a small town. You can't do it."

Sam said nothing. He knew what she meant. Very little got by a small town.

"Annie Brown has disappeared," she abruptly changed the subject.

"What do you mean?"

"I've been tutoring her this summer. Yesterday she simply did not show up. I went to her home to speak with her parents—her stepparents, really. They were very rude; very evasive. They refused to allow me in the house. They said Annie had gone to Bradville to visit relatives—her relatives. The girl has no relatives, Sam—anywhere. I know that for a fact. She's been telling me for a month or more that her stepfather has been—making advances toward her. Her stepmother even told her she'd like to see them—you know, do it!"

The scene of Conway caressing his daughter filled Sam's brain. He told Jane Ann what he'd seen that morning. All of it.

"That's been happening all over town, Sam. Whitfield is turning into a cesspool. I've been propositioned two dozen times this past week and some of the remarks from men have been really nasty."

"I've heard some pretty rough things about Brother Farben," Sam said. "If they are true, Jane Ann, I just can't believe he's a minister."

"I don't think he is, Sam. He and Otto got together the other night."

Sam's eyes widened when she said, "I saw them, Sam. Otto is one of the men who propositioned me."

"Too many things happening to this town to be counted off as coincidence."

"What do you think is happening in Whitfield, Sam?"

He almost spoke of his suspicions, then held back, shaking his head.

She smiled at him. "Everybody tells their problems to you, Sam. Who do you tell your problems to?"

"The greatest listener of all—God. Now about that back door?"

"Don't you trust me, Sam?"

He was being honest when he said, "I don't trust myself, Janey."

She touched his hand and the sensation was almost electric to him. Sam feverishly hoped God was not taking this moment to peer inside his head, for his thoughts—despite his efforts—were borderline erotic.

Sam pulled his hand away from her fingertips. "About that back door?" he said stubbornly.

She laughed. "Can't blame a girl for trying. All right, Sam.

George Best and Jimmy Perkins."

Sam nodded, returning to his breakfast before it got cold. No great shakes in the kitchen, he wasn't about to let this good meal go to waste.

He said, "It doesn't surprise me about Best, he's a first-class horse's behind. Jimmy, though, that comes as a shock. Jane Ann, let me ask you something, other than the obvious, were they acting strangely?"

"I—don't know quite how to say this, Sam. Best. well, he acted the way he always acts—you know, what you said. But Jimmy—he wasn't himself."

"Explain that, please."

She pushed her breakfast plate from her, the meal only half eaten. "Sam, I don't believe Jimmy knew what he was doing. He acted . . . drugged, or something. His movements were—jerky, I guess. But they weren't drunk—neither of them. I know how a drunk person acts, my father died an alcoholic. Perkins and Best were not drunk."

Sam finished his breakfast and Jane Ann poured him another cup of coffee. He said, "Perkins acted as though—well, perhaps his mind was being controlled?"

"Exactly, Sam! Yes."

"Interesting," he said dryly. "How did you prevent them from coming into the house?"

She smiled grimly. "I was raised on a working cattle ranch, Sam. My father was foreman for years—before the bottle got the best of him. Let me show you something."

She left the kitchen, returning in a moment with a 12 gauge pump shotgun. "Best told me how well-endowed he was, and what he'd like to do to me. I pointed this at his crotch, chambered a round, and told him if he didn't leave me alone, he wouldn't have any equipment to do it with—to anybody! He got the message."

"I should imagine so," the minister said with a half-smile. He had been told by Chester Stokes, a member of his church, that Jane Ann was gutsy; not the fainting female type. He believed it. "Is that thing still loaded?"

"Yes, it is. Best said he'd—they'd be back when the fifteen was complete—whatever that means. Said he'd be back to finish the job. He went into a lot of detail as to just what he was going to do to me. I told him when he came back, badge or no badge, I was going to shoot first and ask questions later."

"The fifteen?" Sam said, puzzled. "You sure he didn't say

the fifteenth?"

"No. He said when the fifteen was complete."

"Did Jimmy say anything?"

"He never opened his mouth."

"I've talked with rape victims before, Janey—those who have been threatened with rape, and those who were actually physically assaulted. But you seem—I don't know—especially bitter, but not afraid."

"Yes. Well, there's a reason, Sam. I don't remember my mother. I was about two or three when she died. She'd gone horseback riding by herself. She liked to do that, so daddy told me. She was a superb rider. But that day she didn't come back. I was—oh, I guess fourteen or fifteen years old before daddy told me what really happened to her. He was drunk when he told me. Mother had been raped—horribly. Very badly used. Then she was mutilated almost beyond recognition, with knives. The police never caught those who did it."

"Where did this happen, Janey?"

"About halfway between Tyson's Lake and the Dig site."

"Tyson's Lake is the area that's all fenced off?"

"Yes. It's been fenced off for as long as I can remember. Caves and bottomless pits out there. It's to keep the kids out—for their own good."

"I see," Sam muttered. "Yes. Mutilated with knives, you said?"

"Yes. They—whoever did it—cut patterns on her skin. Old Mr. Kramer—he used to be chief of police here—told me that it looked to him like some kind of ceremony. A rite of some sort."

"Kramer? I don't know the name."

"Oh, he's dead, Sam. He's been dead ten years, Yes, that's right. He died right after he told me that. I was seventeen, so that was ten years ago."

"How did he die?"

"Well, that's a good question, Sam. He just disappeared one day. He was an old man. Some said he was getting senile, but I don't believe that." She shrugged. "His body was never found."

"Just disappeared, huh? Where was he when he 'just disappeared?'"

"Why, out by Tyson's Lake, I think. I know Mr. Kramer used to prowls around out there."

"I see." A small ray of light shining on a still tiny idea

beginning to form in Sam's mind.

"Well, let's call the chief, Janey. Let's tell John what happened here last night. We'll let him handle it."

"Incredible!" John Benton said, shaking his head in disgust. "I've got to ask you this, Jane Ann, are you sure it was Best and Perkins?"

"Oh, yes. I had the back porch light on. I know them both very well."

The Chief nodded. "I just don't understand why Jimmy was with Best last night. It was his night off."

John had her repeat the story several times; she did not waver in the telling. The Chief took careful notes in his neat handwriting. A retired highway patrol officer, John Benton was rated an excellent police officer, very thorough in his investigations.

"I had high hopes for Jimmy," John said, putting his notepad in his hip pocket. "He was shaping up to be a good officer—so I thought. I was going to recommend him for the Highway Patrol." He looked at Jane Ann. "I'm sorry this had to happen to you, Jane Ann. I've known you since you were a baby. I was on duty the night your mother died. Helped investigate that tragedy. I also helped in the investigation of your father's disappearance."

"Disappearance?" Sam cut in, looking at Jane Ann. "I thought your father died?"

"He disappeared, Sam," she said. "Nine years ago. He's listed as dead, now."

"Earl Burke was an alcoholic, Sam," John said. "In his later life, that is. He never touched the stuff until his wife was killed, then he went over the line in a big way. He used to get drunk and roam the area where the tragedy occurred."

"The Tyson's Lake area?"

"That's correct. One night he went out there and never came back."

"How'd he get out there?"

"In his pickup. We found the truck, but we never found Earl."

"And the assumption is—"

"He climbed the fence surrounding the area and fell into one of the deep pits or caves out there. It's a very unsafe area, Sam. Caves, holes, a few lava pits that are very unstable. A hundred and fifty acres, all told. 'Bout sixty acres in timber. But—"

"You've seen these holes and caves and pits?" Sam

interrupted.

"Well, no, Sam. But the area has been posted since my father was just a boy, back in the 1890s. No one goes in there except Karl Sorenson—he owns the land."

"He is a disgusting man!" Jane Ann blurted.

Sam agreed with her, but asked, "In what way, Janey?"

John smiled, waiting for Jane Ann to elaborate.

"He ridicules God and anyone who worships Him. Sorenson says if he ever decides to worship anything, it'll be Satan, because the devil is more 'practical.'"

"Yes," Sam said. "I've heard that Sorenson says that."

"There are probably a lot of other things people won't discuss around you, Sam," John seemed ill at ease. "He's a womanizer, Sam. He's some pretty raunchy parties out at his ranch. Not the kind of stuff you'd want to discuss in front of a lady. He's been known, from time to time, to import some—talent, if you want to use that word, out to his ranch. These people would perform, if you know what I mean." Benton flushed. "I don't feel right discussing this before you, Sam."

Sam grinned. "John, before I became a minister, I saw lots of things knocking around the country, including a lady with a donkey. Do I have to say more?"

Benton shook his head, a half-smile on his lips. "I heard you were quite a rounder before you became a minister. Guess the talk was true."

"What about a lady and a donkey?" Jane Ann asked.

"Never mind, Jane Ann," Benton said sternly, fatherly. "Point I was making, Sam, is this, rumor has it that some of those people never left this area. There's been some real horror stories come out of Sorenson's ranch."

"Can't the authorities do anything?"

"No evidence, Sam. Nothing to prove anything out-of-the-way took place. Besides, Karl is a very wealthy man, with connections at the State House, if you know what I mean."

"Money talks?"

"And swears, sometimes."

"Interesting," Sam said softly. He did not elaborate, and John did not pick up on his softly spoken innuendo. Jane Ann looked at her minister, as if attempting to read his thoughts.

"I'll put Best and Perkins on suspension until this is all proven or cleared up. You will press charges, Jane Ann?"

"Oh, boy, will I!"

The chief walked to the door. "I've got some plaster in my

car. I want to make some impressions of some prints out back. I'll get back to you both."

FIVE

Benton had taken his impressions in the earth, thanked Sam and Jane Ann, and left, saying he was going to get to the bottom of this. He was going after Best and Perkins right now.

Sam glanced at his watch, shocked to discover it was only eight-thirty.

"You look tired, Sam."

"Somewhere between tired and confused. I don't believe I've had a restful night's sleep in several weeks."

"Michelle?"

"She's part of it, I suppose." He looked at Jane Ann, sitting across the small living room from him, one leg tucked under the other. It looked like an awfully uncomfortable way to sit. Sam started to tell her of his dreams, then decided against it. No point in dumping his problems on her. His gaze swept the room, stopping at a book on demonic possession. It lay on the coffee table.

"I didn't know you were interested in that stuff?" he pointed toward the book.

She leaned forward, picking up the book, a slight smile on her lips. "I wasn't—until a couple of weeks ago."

"Why all the sudden interest?" Sam tried to keep his voice cool, but he had a feeling Jane Ann could see past his calmness.

"I saw the book in a store in Rock Point. It seemed to pull me toward it. That must sound awfully stupid, Sam, but I swear I couldn't take my eyes off it. Do you know much about possession and devil worship?"

"More than most Protestant ministers, I should imagine. I almost got kicked out of seminary several times because I wanted to probe more deeply into the subject. I'm afraid most Protestants tend to take that subject rather lightly."

"Do you take it lightly?"

"No, I don't."

Their eyes met, locked, held. A chiming clock rang the quarter hour, the melodious donging echoing through the house. Sam stood up, knowing if he did not get out of this house—right then!—one of them could very easily do something they both would regret.

"Let's sit outside, Janey. On the porch."

"Are you afraid of me, Sam?" Her eyes were very mischievous, shining at him.

"I refuse to answer that question. Come on."

She followed him, carrying the book on possession and devil worship. She sat in the porch swing, Sam in a straight-back chair. Neither of them spoke for several minutes.

"Can you feel it, Sam?" she asked, her voice low, little more than a whisper.

"What are you talking about?" But he knew very well what she meant.

"This town."

He sighed, nodding his head. "Yes. I can feel . . . something. For several weeks, now."

"What is it, Sam?"

The one question he had hoped she would not ask. "I don't know," he admitted.

"Want to hear a theory?"

"Go ahead."

"Church attendance is down—all over Whitfield. I don't have to tell you that. People are behaving strangely, as if the word morality no longer existed. Two police officers tear down my door and threaten to rape me; draw dirty pictures on the door. Kids are disappearing. I'm practically throwing myself at my minister. I'm ashamed of myself, Sam. But I'm scared."

"So am I, Janey. So am I. I've a confession to make: my own thoughts of you have not exactly been pristine the past few weeks."

She smiled, hearing what she wanted to hear. "Have you talked with Wade lately?"

"No. Not in several weeks—in depth, that is."

"Chester?"

He shook his head. She was getting to something in her own way.

"Sam, for years Whitfield has been a nice place to live. People always got along well, helping each other in times of need. We're not growing in population, but we're not shrinking, either. There hasn't been any major crime in this town for years. We had a Red Cross chapter, a March of Dimes, a Rotary, a Lions—all the normal clubs and organizations. Yet in less than two months' time, they've all shut down. And there is this: nothing, and I mean *nothing* was ever done about Brother Hayes's murder. This man Farben

comes in, professing to be a Baptist minister. But he isn't. Don't ask me how I know. I just do. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know, though, am I, Sam?"

"No, Janey, you're not. But I thought I was the only one who suspected something out of whack around Whitfield. But you're leaving out something: Sheriff Marsh."

"Yes. Mr. Marsh was a good, decent man. A man in excellent health who suddenly drops dead of a heart attack. Two days after his funeral, his body is stolen. How many bodies have been stolen so far, Sam?"

"Too many, I'm afraid. But nothing is being done about it."

"I didn't put it all together until last week. School was out, I didn't have anything to do, so I began looking around this town. I don't like what I've found. Or what I think I've found."

"It's always on a Friday," Sam muttered.

"You *do* know devil worship."

"Not as much as Father Dubois, but enough to pique my curiosity—get me moving on my suspicions. I'll start today."

"You've talked with Father Dubois?"

"Not lately, but I intend to."

"Today is Friday, Sam."

"I know," the minister said quietly. "What time did Perkins and Best try to break in?"

"It was—let me think. Twelve-thirty. I remember because I woke up when they started driving up and down this street. That was at midnight. I lay in bed wondering what in the world was going on."

"Why did you ask me if I'd talked with Chester or Wade?"

"I overheard them talking at the church last Sunday. Chester is worried about this town, and his children. But Wade laughed at him. He said it was Chester's imagination. But Sam, it wasn't a very convincing laugh."

"Yes, for the first time in his life, Wade's sent his kids off to summer camp. So did Miles. Wade is trying to play the skeptical-reporter bit. But his act is not coming off very well. He's worried."

"He's a good Christian man."

"One of the best I know, considering the line of work he's in."

"What do you mean?"

"Reporters have to deal with all the frailties of humankind; it must be difficult not to become cynical after a time."

"You're worried; I'm worried; Miles is worried; Wade is worried." She shook her head. "Sam, what do the numbers

666 mean to you?"

He smiled. "That's a tonic, isn't it?"

"Come on!" she laughed. "Be serious."

"It's from Revelations. The Beast. Chapter 13. Mentions two beasts. The mark of the beast. The number is six hundred three score and six."

"Do you believe it?"

"I have no reason to doubt it."

"How about an upside down cross?"

"If you've read that book," he pointed to the book on devil worship, "you know what it means. Devil worship."

"I know," she said. "I've seen both things."

"Where?" he was instantly alert.

"There is an upside down cross just inside the front window of Hoge's Pool Hall. The numbers 666 are painted on the side of a barn, just outside of town. They weren't there last week. I'm sure of that."

"Of course, Janey, we must remember that everything we're saying may just be the product of overactive imaginations. We have to consider that."

"I have considered it, Sam—and rejected it."

He nodded, not committing himself. "All right. You've said nothing about this?"

"Not to a soul, Sam. Except to you." She picked up the book on devil worship and possession. "In this book, Sam, the author says some—well, disturbing things. He says there are Beasts on this earth that—well answer to the devil or the devil's agent. He says these Beasts are God's mistakes. I really feel funny saying that. He maintains that no one really knows exactly how many times God tried to make man in His image; that God may have tried several times, many times, even, and these Beasts are part of His failures. He says God managed to destroy all His other failures, but at least one effort survived, due to Satan's intervention, and the devil can call them out whenever he chooses."

"That's really not a new theory, Janey. I believe most intelligent people—layman or theologian—will have to agree that anthropologists have just about proved humankind evolved, working its way up from primates—out of the caves. I believe that works right along with the Bible, not against it, as some argue. God may well have made mistakes—if you want to use that word—in His endeavors to create. And He is certainly capable of destroying what He created."

"You're an unusual minister, Sam," Jane Ann said, all the

love in the world shining in her eyes.

"I may be an unusual one, but I'm not at all certain I'm a good one."

"Doubts, Sam? You?"

"I'm a married man, yet," he hesitated, "I'm lusting after another woman. It's the first time in my ministry I've done so."

"That just proves you're human, Sam—not a rock."

He wanted very much to touch her. He wanted very much to do several things to her and with her. He fought back his feelings, apologizing to God for them.

"I don't want you staying here, Janey. Not after what happened last night. Pack up a few things and we'll go over to Chester's; tell him what happened. Chester and Faye will welcome you in their home."

"I was hoping you'd suggest that. I won't be a minute."

"You're a liar!" Patrolman George Best snapped the words at Jane Ann. "Me and Jimmy wasn't nowhere near your house last night. What are you tryin' to pull, anyway?"

The two patrolmen, in civilian clothes, stood side by side in Chester's den, confronting Jane Ann. Sam stood with Chester and the Chief.

Jane Ann stood with chin high, not backing down.

"Watch your mouth!" Sam warned the patrolman.

Best whirled, facing Sam. "Hey!" he pointed a finger at the minister. "You stay out of this, preacher. This is none of your concern."

Only the quickly outflung arm of John Benton prevented Sam from knocking the young patrolman flat on his backside. "Easy, Sam," the Chief cautioned.

Officer Perkins gave Sam a peculiar glance. He knew the minister's background, and what he was very capable of doing. "Reverend Balon, we didn't do those things. As God is my witness, we didn't do them!"

"You don't have to explain a damn thing to that psalm singer!" Best looked at Sam with hate.

"You're fired!" Benton snapped. "I will not tolerate that kind of language toward Sam Balon. As far as you not being at Jane Ann's—I think I can prove you were."

Best sneered at him. "I'd like to see you do that!"

"Take off your right shoe."

"What?"

"You hear me. Take off your right shoe. Those are city-

issued patrolman's shoes. You were wearing them last evening because I recognize the scuff on the toe of the left shoe. I told you to polish them. You didn't. Now, you want to prove you weren't at Jane Ann's? Take off your right shoe."

"I'll be damned!"

"I'm almost certain of that," Sam muttered, just loud enough for John to hear.

A corner of the Chief's mouth crinkled with a small smile.

"Come on, George," Jimmy urged. "You know we weren't there. Take off your shoe if that'll prove us innocent."

For a brief moment, a look of pure panic crossed Best's face. He shook his head. "No. I won't."

"George," his friend said patiently, "I could always whip you in high school, and I can do it now if I have to. Take off your shoe!"

Best shook his head stubbornly.

Jimmy balled his fists, anger flushing his face a deep red.

"Easy, Perkins," John stopped him. "You see, Best, I took an impression this morning in Janey's back yard, by the shattered door. An impression of a nice, fresh footprint with a pyramid-shaped cut in the heel of the right shoe. If you don't have a cut like that on your heel, then you're off the hook. It couldn't belong to Perkins—I measured the imprint. It's a size ten and a half. Your size. Perkins wears a nine."

Best whirled, slamming a shoulder into Jimmy, knocking his partner sprawling on the floor. Best ran out the side door of the den, jumped in his car, and roared away.

"That bastard!" Jimmy hollered, struggling to get to his feet. His face crimsoned when he looked first at the ladies, then at Sam. "I'm sorry. I forgot for a minute."

Sam helped the young cop to his feet. "Something's not right here. You just don't behave like a person who would do what Jane Ann said you did."

"I didn't do it, sir. I swear to God I didn't." He looked at Jane Ann. "Janey, you used to babysit me, when you were in the seventh grade and I was in the second grade. I wouldn't do something like this to you!"

"All right," John said. "Let's just all sit down and talk this thing out. Be calm. We'll get to the bottom of this."

"I'll get some coffee," Fay said.

Over coffee and Faye Stokes's homemade donuts, the mood relaxed in the den. Jimmy Perkins looked stunned and very confused.

"Okay," John said. "Let's get to it. We can assume—but not

prove—from Best's actions here, that he did what he is accused of doing. I can assure you all that he will never wear another badge on my department."

Sam suddenly thought of Walter Addison. He thought: Not on your department, John, but I'll bet you a nickel Best *will* wear another badge—and soon.

"Now, then, Jimmy," John leaned forward, "I want you to tell me exactly what you and Best did last night. Think! I want every round you men made. Every street, every call. Then I want you to tell me why you were with Best—it was your evening off."

As trained cops almost always do, Jimmy called the previous evening's activities out by rote, ending with, " 'Bout eleven we called in for a coffee break. As to why I was with Best, I—uh—don't know, Chief. I guess there must have been a reason, but I can't remember. That sounds stupid, doesn't it?"

"Have you received a bump on the head lately, Jimmy?"

"No, sir."

"You ate at the drive-in at about eleven o'clock—or had coffee?"

"Yes, sir."

"And after that?"

The patrolman looked more confused than ever. "Why—uh—there is no after that, sir. I guess George must have taken me home. The next thing I remember is you, pounding on my door this morning."

"You looked and behaved as if you'd been drinking the night before."

"No, sir! I don't drink. Never have. But I'll admit, I did feel kind of funny this morning."

Benton stared at Perkins for several very long seconds, his gaze not wavering. He was not sure if Perkins was a liar or a fool or both. "Did you talk with anyone at the drive-in?"

"Sure! Always the same fellow. He's there every Thursday night at eleven. Been there every Thursday night for weeks; lots of people talk to him. But I don't like him."

"What fellow?" Sam asked.

"You know, that fellow with the funny medallion around his neck. From out at the Dig."

The Chief's expression was that of extreme exasperation. "Perkins, what in the devil are you talking about?"

"Very apt choice of words," Sam said.

Jane Ann smiled, but her smile was tight and strained.

"The director," Perkins said. "Dr. Black Wilder. He's always there on Thursday nights. I thought everybody in the whole town knew that."

After Perkins had left the Stokes' home, John Benton, Chester and Faye, and Sam and Jane Ann sat drinking coffee and talking.

"I'll bet money," John said, "that Jimmy is telling the truth."

"I agree," Sam said, glancing at the Chief. "He was with Best. But he doesn't remember it. Next question is, why doesn't he remember it?"

"And," Chester spoke, "why Jimmy? And why doesn't Jimmy like this Wilder fellow?"

Jane Ann abruptly tossed the book on devil worship and possession on the coffee table. It landed title-up, startling them all.

The Chief laughed. "No, Janey, not that. I'm a Christian man—I think. Most of the time. But that," he glanced at the book, "is going way out in left field."

Chester said nothing as his eyes caught Sam's, holding them for several seconds. Chester had something to say to the minister, but not in John's presence.

Faye looked worried, and, Sam thought, perhaps just a bit frightened. She, too, had something on her mind.

Sam left the others chatting of things of no importance, excusing himself, going to the bathroom. He passed by the bedrooms in the hall, the kids' bedrooms, Jack and Ruby. An odor hung faintly in the hall. Where had he smelled it? Then he remembered. Michelle's bedroom had the same odor.

On the way back to the den, Sam thought, what am I doing? Adding two and two and coming up with five? So there is an odor in the house. So what?

But why the same odor?

He had no answer.

"John?" Sam asked. "How is the membership at your church holding up?" The Chief was a member of the Episcopal Church.

Why—" the man hesitated, "come to think of it, it's down. Yes, down by quite a bit."

Sam looked at Jane Ann. "I don't want you to press charges, Janey. Just let this incident drop. I think it would be best. John has cautioned Jimmy not to say anything about it. Best won't mention it. But I've got a hunch Best will be behind another badge by this time tomorrow."

"Not on *my* department, he won't!" John said.

"No," Sam agreed. "He'll be working for the Sheriffs Department."

"Walter?" John was startled. "Why would Walter hire Best after I've fired him?"

Sam toyed with his empty coffee cup for a moment. "I'd like to ask you a few questions, John—if you don't mind. You have a few minutes to spare?"

"Fire away, Sam. I'd like to hear what's on your mind."

"The sheriff is telling everyone that the FBI came in here, investigating the disappearance of Larry and Joan. Did they talk to you?"

The Chief shook his head. "No, Sam, they did not."

"Don't you think that strange?"

"Very. But I've kept my mouth shut about it."

"Why?"

"Because—well," his face tightened for a moment. "You ask your questions, Sam, then I'll tell you my opinions, okay?"

"Deal. Now then, Bill Mathis says the FBI talked with him, at length, in his office at school. But Jane Ann knows that to be a lie. Mathis was clear across the state, at a meeting. So that makes him a liar. Why would he lie? Add this up, John: Joan was a student of Jane Ann's, yet the FBI didn't question her. Joan was a member of my church, but they didn't talk to me. Larry worked part-time for Chester, yet they didn't speak to Chester about it. Larry was a member of your church, but they didn't question Father Haskell or you. Your addition is as good as mine, John. The FBI didn't come in because they weren't notified."

For a time, the Chief kept his eyes downcast, looking at the coffee table. He was deep in thought. Finally, he nodded his head. "Yes, you're right, Sam—it stinks! It's bothered me for weeks; things I just can't seem to get hold of. And it's not just the kids. It's all these grave robberies, too. And nothing is being done about it. Then there is the general mood of this town. I've got a very bad feeling that something awful is going to happen. Call it a cop's hunch, if you will."

"I know, John."

"There's something else, too," the Chief said. "Walter told me a barefaced lie the morning the kids were reported missing. He told me he'd been to a sheriff's meeting the night before, just got in that morning. That's not the truth, Sam. There was no sheriff's meeting—I checked."

"What made you check, John?"

"Because he volunteered the information to me, Sam—for no reason. His answers were too pat, and too quick. I never asked for any of them. It was as if he was *trying* to convince me of his innocence. But why should I even suspect he'd done anything wrong?"

"There's something else," Chester spoke. "I overheard Walter talking to one of his deputies yesterday. I was standing by my door at the store, just behind that display to the right of the front door. They were walking past, stopped, and didn't see me. I didn't catch all the conversation, but what I did hear froze me. Walter said, 'Does the Coven meet tomorrow night?' The deputy, Harris, said, 'Yes, at full dark, as always.' Excuse me, ladies, Sam, but Walter said, 'Joan had some good pussy.' The deputy laughed and said, 'Prime gash.' Then they walked on. I didn't know what to do, or even if they were talking about the missing Joan. I didn't sleep much last night. Tossed and turned. I'm glad I've got it off my chest. But Sam, what's a Coven?"

Jane Ann's eyes darkened as she stared at the book on devil worship and possession. She said nothing.

"You're sure they said Coven?" Sam asked.

"I think so, Sam."

"And now you believe they were talking about young Joan?" John asked, ignoring the question about the Coven.

"Yes, I do, John."

Sam made no more mention of the Coven, hoping that question would die. He wanted more time to think and act before answering that. Coven!

Jane Ann sat wringing her hands nervously.

John sighed. "I've never seen such a dramatic change in a man as has occurred with Walter. All in the past six months. Never been one iota of gossip about him—until recently." He shook his head. "Call it a cop's intuition if you will, but I've suspected for some time that Walter knew more about those kids than he was letting on. Now, this."

"Black Wilder," Jane Ann said.

All eyes turned to her. "What?" John asked.

"Nothing happened until he came in, bringing his dig crews. As soon as Wilder came in, things began happening. Strange things."

"I agree with her," Sam said. "We talked about this a couple of hours ago. John, can you run a check on this Wilder?"

"I already have, Sam," Benton replied. "Weeks ago, as a matter of fact. I ran them all out at the Dig—just as soon as

those kids were reported missing."

"And?" Chester asked.

The Chief shrugged. "Nothing. They're all clean. Oh, one thing did crop up: most of them belong to one of those kooky cults based in New York."

"What kind of cult?" Sam asked.

"It's a church, or a religion, they claim. But I've never heard of it. It's called the Church of the Fifteen. Some kind of French words after that. What was it? Oh, yeah, Le Diable. That's probably the wrong pronunciation, my French is not very good. You ever heard of that church, Sam?"

"Yes, I have." But he would not elaborate. Chester looked at him curiously. Jane Ann stirred, but said nothing.

The Chief rose to his feet. "Well, I have a suggestion, folks. We've thrown a lot of assumptions around here this morning. A lot of hearsay, some gossip. But we haven't proven a thing, so let's just keep all this to ourselves. I'm going to call the FBI just as soon as I get back to my office. I'll find out if Walter notified them as he claims he did. Then I'll get back to you all."

"One more thing, John," Sam said. "Did you listen to the radio station much—while it was still operating?"

The Chief shook his head. "No, can't say as I did. Don't like hill-billy music and can't stand this new rock and roll. Why?"

"Just curious, that's all."

When the door closed behind the Chief, Chester asked, "What's all this about the radio station, Sam?"

"Just a hunch, Ches. Forget it. It's probably nothing."

"Sam?" Jane Ann said. "The Church of the Fifteen. Remember what Best said to me?"

"Yes, I do."

"Le Diable?" Faye said. "What does that mean?"

Sam's gaze touched them all. "The Church of the Devil."

After being assured that Jane Ann was, of course, welcome to stay with the Stokes as long as she liked—they wouldn't have it any other way—Sam left, heading for home. He felt... evil around him, and knew, somehow, it was not his imagination. Not after hearing what Chester said.

Coven.

He reminded himself he was a minister before he began cursing in frustration.

This was Friday, and Sam had been more than an avid student of the occult and devil worship. Black Masses were always held on a Friday.

"Come on, Sam!" he hit the steering wheel in anger. "Knock off the jumping to conclusions."

There was a book somewhere in his attic at the parsonage—a very authoritative study on devil worship. The best ever written, some experts said. He would dig it out, read it.

He heard the sirens coming his way and a chill touched him; a feeling of deep despair. Something awful had happened. And for some reason, Sam had the gut feeling that whatever it was would touch him personally.

Another block, and Sam saw Benton's car nosed against the curb, the Chief stretched out on the sidewalk, people standing around him. Sam pulled to the side of the road, parked his car, and got out, walking up to the knot of people just as Doctor King arrived. The young doctor jumped out of his car and ran toward the men kneeling by John Benton.

No hurry, Sam thought—he's dead.

How do I know that? he questioned silently.

The sheriff slid to a tire-squalling halt, blocking the street with his patrol car, jumping out of the car. Sam nodded a greeting. Addison ignored him. Sam leaned against a tree, watching Tony minister to Benton.

"Terrible thing," a voice spoke from behind him. Miles Lansky.

"Yes," Sam turned, the Jew and the Gentile locking eyes. "A terrible thing."

"When you get time," Miles spoke softly, so only Sam could hear, "I'd like to talk to you. This afternoon, maybe. If not, tomorrow will do. It's important, Sam."

Miles knows, Sam thought. He knows. The minister took a chance. "You feel it, too, Miles?" he kept his voice low.

"Yes," Miles whispered. "Whatever *it* is."

"We'll get together."

"Good."

The two men stood silently, watching Doctor King work on Benton. Tony stood up, shaking his head. "Cover him," he said. "He's dead."

"Awful!" Addison said. "Just awful! What caused this, Tony?"

The doctor shrugged, wanting very much to reply: How in the hell should I know? Instead, "Heart attack, perhaps. Stroke. We'll do an autopsy."

"Cut up the body?!" the sheriff seemed unduly alarmed at the suggestion. "What purpose would that solve?"

"To find out what killed him! What else?" Tony did not like stupid questions from people he felt should know better.

The sheriff put his hand on the young doctor's shoulder. "I didn't mean to be so snappish, Tony. I'm sorry. Forgive me. I've known John for so long, that's all."

"I understand, Walter." But his tone indicated something else. He looked squarely at Sam, just for a few seconds cutting his eyes down the street, toward town.

Sam nodded his head.

Tony walked away from the scene, walking toward Sam and Miles. Only a few curious spectators had gathered to rubberneck at the dead man. Only a few. That, to Sam, was unusual. He looked up and down the street. Almost no one stood on their porches, gawking, as is usually the case with tragedy. Odd.

"Strange, isn't it?" Miles said softly.

"Yes," was all Sam had time to say before Tony reached their side, shaking hands with both men.

Tony clasped the minister on the shoulder. When he spoke, it was loud enough for Walter to hear. "Sam? You haven't forgotten your appointment this afternoon, have you? Two o'clock, now. You're overdue for that physical."

Sam had just had a physical in June. Tony knew that perfectly well—he had given it to Sam. "I haven't forgotten, Tony. I'll be there."

Addison was no longer paying attention to them.

As Tony walked away, Miles said, "I thought you just had a physical? Didn't you tell me that a few weeks ago?"

"Yes, I did. Tony wants to talk about something."

"Probably the same thing I want to talk about. See you later, Sam."

Sam drove toward home, looking at the town of Whitfield in the hot light of summer. A Friday. Very few adults walked the streets. Those that did were elderly. No young people played on the sidewalks. No bike riders. No teenagers walking along, holding hands and listening to portable radios, savoring young love in the summer. The town seemed—to Sam—to be almost dead.

Or undead, the thought jumped into his mind.

How could I have missed what was happening?

Come on, Balon, he urged his mind to relax. Knock it off.

Sam did not park in the drive as he usually did. He pulled to the curb in front of the house, very quietly getting out of the car, closing the door softly. He slipped up the front steps, easing into the living room. He didn't know why he was doing this, and he felt a little like a fool. Sam Spade in preacher's clothes.

The record player was blaring, but it was not the music that caught and held Sam as if in a vise. Michelle was on the phone in the kitchen.

"Do we meet tonight?" she asked. "Good! Will it soon be time?"

A moment of silence.

Sam froze, unintentionally hidden by the partition separating dining room from kitchen. He did not like hearing this in such a manner, preferring to confront his wife openly, but his legs felt like lead.

"I'll be ready, Dalton," she said.

DALTON? Dalton Revere? The man was a close friend. Or so Sam had believed. But, Sam grimaced, that's so often the case. A friend. Dalton was an elder in his church, and twenty years older than Michelle.

Sam felt sick.

He slipped quietly out the front door, closing it softly behind him, stepping out on the porch. He waited for a ten count, then opened the door, walking back into the house, shutting the door hard behind him. He hoped he had given his wife—and the word wife disgusted him—time to compose herself from her verbal fornication.

She stood by the dining room table, smiling, looking at him. "How has your day been, Sam?"

"Interesting," he forced himself to return the smile. "And very informative."

"Oh?"

He did not elaborate, merely stood looking at the woman, his wife. A tall, very beautiful woman. Who—the thought twisted out of his mind—was screwing an elder in his church.

Not very preacherly of you, Sam. But, he bitterly reflected, I don't feel very preacherly at this moment.

For a few seconds, he allowed himself the erotic pleasure/pain of imagining Michelle and Dalton together. He forced those images from him. Before he could stop his brain, that mass of marvelous recall conjured a picture of Sam and Jane Ann together. The minister felt shame wash over him at the eroticism of his thoughts. He pushed the image from him.

"What was the reason for all those sirens a few minutes ago?" she asked.

Bluntly, he told her about John Benton.

She gasped, putting a hand to her throat. "How awful!"

But it was an act, Sam realized. What a marvelous actress she was, had become, or had always been, Sam reflected sourly. How many men, he questioned his mind, has she entertained while I was out spreading the word of the Lord?

The medallion about her neck seemed to sparkle at him, casting flashes that were almost hypnotic in their radiance. He lifted his eyes from the gold, meeting her dark eyes. They flared with anger and lust, a curious combination shining at him.

Careful, he warned his heart, the message shooting from his brain: That medallion is dangerous.

But, why?

The man and woman stood glaring at each other.

Help me, Lord, Sam silently prayed.

Her eyes fell away from his.

Michelle said, looking down at the carpet, "Sometime, Sam, soon, we've got to talk. About us."

"Yes. I think we should." The medallion shone with a greater intensity, and Sam had to force himself not to look at it.

Michelle touched a breast; a light touch, a sensuous half-caress. "I haven't been very nice to you lately, have I?"

DANGER flashed through Sam's mind. But, why? His thoughts shot silently into space. Why? "No, Michelle, I guess you haven't."

She licked her lips, her tongue snaking out, wetting the lipstick. "Perhaps—?" the one word invitation was left hanging, for Sam to pick up.

The picture of Michelle and Dalton entered his brain. When he spoke, his words were harsher than he intended. "Thanks, Michelle, but I think I'll pass."

Her face turned ugly with hate, the lips pulling back in a half-snarl.

I've won a battle, Sam thought. I don't know how, or really, why, but I've won. However, he recalled, a woman scorned can be a dangerous thing.

"Yes, Sam," she said, the words tight with anger, "we'll talk someday. I can promise you that."

"What's wrong with now?"

She shook her head, slowly regaining her composure after his harsh rejection. "No. No, I don't believe so. The time is not yet right." She laughed at him.

Sudden anger swept over Sam. "The time? What are you talking about?"

She shrugged, her eyes dark with mystery. "I'm going out. I'll see you later."

"Where are you going?"

Her smiled mocked him. "None of your business," she said. Her bedroom door slammed, punctuating the bluntness of her reply.

Sam walked into the living room, to stand with his back to her bedroom door, arms folded across his massive chest. A few minutes later, he heard the back door slam, then the sound of her car starting, backing out of the drive, the sound dying as she drove away.

The minister stood in the silent house. So, he thought, this is how it feels when love dies. Or has been murdered. What an empty feeling. But was there ever any love between us? On my part, yes. On her part, no—I think not. But if I did love her, where is the sense of loss I'm supposed to be experiencing? Should I be ashamed of my feelings of relief that it's over?

He shook himself like a big bear and suddenly felt better. He glanced toward her bedroom, then walked to the closed door, trying the knob. She had forgotten to lock the door. Slowly, he pushed the door open, his nostrils offended at the odor. The room stank! He flipped on the lights.

The room was in total disarray; clothing flung carelessly about, the floor littered. A filthy black robe hung on a closet door. Sam did not recognize the robe, and he did not, for some reason, want to touch it. The room itself, not just the odor, offended him. The closed space seemed to radiate—he

struggled for the word—evil! It sprang into his mind.

A necklace made of bones and feathers lay on the dresser. A painting of a—what in the world was it? Sam took a closer look. The painting on the wall seemed to glare at him. It was a scene of a not-quite-human thing, but not really an animal. The thing was part ram, part bird, part woman. It was overall disgusting!

The minister had known fear; known it on an intimate basis while in combat in Korea. When he made his first jump from a plane. But what he now experienced was something new to him; something more than fear. He realized, suddenly, where he had seen this painting. It was during a course on devil worship when he was in seminary.

He struggled with his memory until he found what he was searching for. When the witches dance naked, the devil will sometimes make an appearance as a horned goat—a ram. The devil, a master of metamorphosis, moves silently between the world of animal and human, transforming himself into whatever form he chooses.

Sam felt sick as he stood in the room. Sicker still when he looked at the plate on the bottom of the frame. THE CHURCH OF THE FIFTEEN. He knew what that meant. His own wife.

Could it be—? NO! He refused to believe it. Not that.

Sam backed out of the room, closed the door, and ran to the bathroom. Holding his head over the sink, he vomited.

"You look a little pale, Sam," Doctor King said. "You feel all right?"

"I'm okay, Tony. Just haven't been sleeping well lately, that's all."

The young doctor's look was of a man who had heard that story too many times and had not believed it the first time he'd heard it.

Sam sat quietly in Tony's office, his big hands in his lap, his mind still a little numb. After recovering from his sudden sickness, Sam had showered, vigorously soaping and scrubbing himself, as if that alone would remove the stink of his wife's room from his body and the ugly scar from his mind.

The stink was gone; the scar remained.

THE CHURCH OF THE FIFTEEN. If what he suspected was true . . .

When Sam had entered Tony's office, he had been amazed

to find the waiting room empty. With only two doctors in Whitfield, both of them were always busy, working long hours.

Sam looked up. "No patients, Tony?"

"A lot of it going around. The strangeness, I mean."

Tony leaned forward, elbows on his desk. Although the office was empty, he kept his voice low. "Sam, John Benton just had a physical last month—the full treatment. Blood work, urinalysis, EKG, X-rays, everything. John was fifty years old, but his blood pressure was that of a healthy thirty-year-old man. He kept himself in excellent shape: running, calisthenics, the whole bit. He didn't smoke, and never had. Didn't drink, either. His heart was in great shape. Now, I'm not saying he couldn't have had a heart attack, but I will say it's highly unlikely."

"Stroke?"

Tony shrugged. "I sent him to Rock Point for an encephalogram and other tests I can't do here. They all came back triple-A great! John told me he *never* had headaches. He ate the right foods, he got enough rest. It just doesn't add up, Sam."

"But it isn't just John, though, is it, Tony?"

The doctor shook his head. "No. Sam, in four weeks—and I checked my records to be sure—ninety-five percent of my patients have canceled out on me. Only the elderly keep their appointments with me. It's as if the others either don't care if they get sick, or they know they're not going to."

Sam's numbness returned. He fought it away. "How would they know that?"

"You tell me, I'm just a doctor of the body. I've got—had—friends in this town who won't speak to me. Both my receptionist and nurse jumped up one day, cursed me, then quit. I've never seen such a personality change. I'm worried, Sam. This whole town seems to have changed overnight, and I don't like it. I'm suddenly scared, and I don't know why."

"What about Doctor Matthews?"

"He's one of those who won't speak to me. I have *never* seen such a change in a man."

"Tony, how's the attendance at your church?"

The doctor was thoughtful for a few seconds. "Interesting question, Sam. It's steadily declining. I know Father Dubois is concerned about it, and I sense he would like to talk about it, but it's as if—well, this is just a guess—it's—perhaps he doesn't know who to trust! Sam, the feeling I have about this

town is . . . eerie."

"How can you be sure you can trust me?"

The doctor smiled for the first time since Sam entered his office. "I guess we all have to take a chance, Sam."

"Yes. Well, you're right, Tony. Something is going on in Whitfield. I have suspicions, nothing else."

He told Tony of his dreams, of the trouble at Jane Ann's, of the conversation overheard by Chester, of the sheriff's lying, of Bill Mathis's lying, and of his feeling of something evil hanging in the air. He spoke of Doctor Wilder, and the Church of the Fifteen. He did not mention his wife.

"Sam, what is the Church of the Fifteen? I never heard of it."

"My memory is a little hazy on this, but I'll tell you what I can remember. The Church of the Fifteen is the oldest form of Satan worship—oldest known form that can be proven, that is. It dates back to about the fifth century and has to do with the Tarot."

"There are twenty-two cards in the major arcana of the Tarot. The fifteenth card is the Devil. The unnumbered card is the Fool. When read upright, the fifteenth card represents bondage; subordination; black magic; devil worship. The card also means suffering, violence, punishment. But there is more to the Church of the Fifteen that I can't recall—much more. I've got a book on the subject at the house; I'll have to bone up on it."

"Devil worship!" Tony's face twisted in shock. "Sam, do you really believe in that?"

"Yes, I do, Tony. And I think it's been going on around Whitfield for a long time; very quietly going on. And I also believe there is a great deal more to it than we know. This is mere speculation, Tony, but I believe Karl Sorenson is in this up to his ears."

"Nothing would surprise me about that man. My father despised him."

"Why?"

"He—my dad, told me he'd treated several people after some of Sorenson's parties—debaucheries, really. Whip marks on their bodies, and a lot more, Sam. Really sick, twisted stuff. There's been rumors for years about that man."

"You know how Jane Ann's mother died?"

"Yes. Awful! Sam, let's count up what we have. Five minutes after leaving the Stokes' house, a healthy man drops dead of a heart attack—we'll call it that for now. The sheriff

is lying; Bill Mathis is lying; officer Perkins can't remember why he was with Best or helping to tear down Jane Ann's back door; bodies are disappearing from the cemetery; there are rumors of strange goings-on at Glowers Funeral Home; rumors of incest in this town, and Chester says he overheard the sheriff saying that Joan had some—ah—pretty good stuff."

Sam laughed. "It's interesting how people lock up around a preacher."

The doctor grinned, making him appear much younger. Only his eyes remained old before their time.

"Tony, tell me about the 'goings-on at the funeral home."

"It's just whispered rumors among the elderly, Sam. That bodies are not being embalmed. Being buried whole."

"Interesting," Sam said. "But there is more?"

"Yes. Necrophilia and necromancy."

"Necromancy, Tony? You've lost me."

"Black magic; communication with the dead. It's just rumor, Sam."

"But—?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "Added to what you've just told me—I don't know. So we have suspicions, what do we do with them?"

"Keep calm. Say nothing. Just let things develop. How about that autopsy on John?"

Tony shook his head. "No. Mrs. Benton refused to allow it. Oh, I could force it, but—" He sighed in defeat. "Doctor Matthews is the coroner. Dead end there." He lifted his eyes to Sam's. "You're not telling me all you know, are you?"

"No, I'm not, Tony. Not yet."

"Oh! I meant to ask you, have you stocked up on supplies? Milk and so forth?"

"Why? What do you mean?"

"You haven't heard? I just heard this morning. Next Thursday," he glanced at his calendar, "the state is closing highway 72, north and south. We're going to be cut off, for all practical purposes, for a week. You know those old bridges are in bad need of repair."

Sam's smile was both grim and knowing. "Cut off for a week? Now that is interesting, yes indeed."

"Yeah," Tony said. "The National Guard will have helicopters ready to come in if we need anyone medivaced out. But we're really going to be cut off. For a week."

SEVEN

"Five days," Sam muttered, driving away from the doctor's office. "Five days until we're completely isolated—for a week. And the public was not told until today; and not even officially told. Interesting. And a little sad," he concluded, driving slowly through the small town.

Pedestrian traffic was light. Almost all were elderly. Sam saw no young people playing on the sidewalks and streets; no young people walking. Only the elderly.

An eerie feeling overcame the minister, leaving him slightly bewildered and a little shaken with his thoughts and conclusions.

Sam drove to his church, pausing in the stillness of the silent auditorium. The coolness of the empty sanctuary was comforting to him; the hush calming. He always felt much closer to God in here, as if the glass and brick and wood had all combined to form a place of safety, not unlike the hollow of His hand.

Sam sat in a pew. He sat for a long time, his head bowed, submitting to the weariness for a few moments. He was not praying, just allowing his thoughts to drift out and up, in the hope God would somehow hear, and give him instruction. Seated in the pew, Sam fell into a semidoze, his memories working, taking him back in time. Then sleep, brought on by nights of tossing and turning and dreaming, closed his eyes, deepening his breathing. Reminiscences skipped through the preacher's mind, touching different times and places, moving him backward through the years.

"Get 'em! Get 'em!" the lieutenant screamed. "There's four of 'em—right there! They ducked into that ravine."

Corporal Balon and the others sprayed the area with automatic weapon fire. Screaming from the ravine bounced to them. Sam stilled the wailing with a grenade.

"Mean lookin' little fuckers, ain't they?" a soldier said. He stood by Sam's side, looking down at what was left of the four North Koreans. And not that much was left. Bloody guts and shattered bodies, scattered over the dirt and rocks of the ravine.

"Move it out!" the lieutenant said. "We're in deep shit

this far north."

Moving out, the UNPIK guerrilla fighters headed south, toward the thirty-eighth parallel, some miles away. The point man stepped on a mine, blowing him into eternity, shrapnel from the mine knocking the lieutenant down, mangling his right leg.

"We can't call in a chopper," the sergeant said. "Radio's busted—took a round. We'll have to carry him out."

"You guys are all crazy!" the lieutenant said, his face pale, lips bloodless in pain. "We're miles over the line. We're so close you can hear the Chicoms fart! You know we've all got bounties on our head. Get out of here!"

"Shut up, Matt," Sam told him. "We got in this together—we'll get out together."

"We'll go out, all right," the officer gritted his teeth against the pain. "It's miles back to a friendly—"

"You sure talk a lot," Sam said, picking up the smaller man, slinging him onto his back. "Hold on. We'll take turns carrying you until we can rig a litter."

"Crazy bastards!" the lieutenant said.

Only four of the eight-man patrol made it back to their own lines. It took four days, traveling at night. The lieutenant's leg swelled up, turning black with gangrene. Sam cut off the infected leg with a heavy knife, cauterizing the stump. Sam Balon was awarded the Silver Star and promoted to sergeant.

In the cool silence of the church, Sam's head slumped forward. He was deep in sleep.

"Oh, Sam!" the cheerleader moaned in the back seat of the 1940 Ford. Her fingers dug at his back, her legs spread wide. "Will you love me forever and ever?"

Stardust played softly on the radio.

"You know I will," he lied, touching the wetness of her, moving forward, sinking into the damp velvet.

She cried out, biting his bare shoulder in passion.

Sam stirred in his sleep. He remembered the moment, but could not remember her name or her face. Her face—in his dream—was that of Jane Ann.

"HIT THE CHARGES!!" someone yelled. "They're on top of us."

The Americans stood between the enemy and retreating UN forces, in an area that would be known later as Pissed-Off Pass. The UNPIK guerrilla fighters, who would later be known as Special Forces, strong in

name but weak in number, fought back wave after wave of North Koreans, until they were finally overpowered by the sheer numbers of the enemy.

When Sam regained consciousness, he was in a hospital in Japan, a doctor smiling down at him.

"The war's over for you, Sergeant. You're going home."

"How many made it out alive?" Sam asked, his voice no more than a whisper.

The doctor shook his head, hesitated, then said, "Not very many."

"What a waste," Sam said.

"Yes," he heard the doctor say.

Someone touched him on the shoulder and Sam came up fighting.

"Whoa, Sam! It's me—Chester. Take it easy, preacher."

Despite the coolness of the church, Sam was sweating. He opened his fists. He had almost hit Chester Stokes. He was not in Korea; he was in Whitfield, in his church, on the corner of Bran-ford and Elm. Sam steadied his breathing, wiping away the sweat with the back of his hand.

"You were moaning in your sleep, Sam," the older man told him. "Nightmare?"

Sam nodded. "I suppose you could call it that."

"You were calling out a name, Sam."

"What name?"

"Does it really matter, now?"

"It might if anyone but you heard it."

"She's a good girl, Sam, and she loves you."

"I happen to be married, Chester."

"To a woman who is running around on you. And I know with whom. You do, too, probably. Come on, Sam! You're human. Just because you're a minister doesn't make you a rock, void of feelings."

I have feelings, Sam wanted to tell him. I have feelings a minister should not have.

"Let's go into the study, Chester."

While Chester sat reading a pamphlet, Sam washed his face in the small bathroom just off the study. He glanced at his watch. Three-thirty. Friday afternoon.

"Jane Ann's still pretty shaken up," Chester said, watching Sam sit down behind his desk. "But she's tough, she'll recover quickly."

"I hope you and Faye don't mind her staying for a

while."

"You know we don't, Sam."

The minister drummed his fingertips on the desk top. "Chester, what do you know about highway 72 being closed for a week, beginning next Thursday?"

"What!?"

"That was my reaction. Yes, Tony just told me."

"First I've heard of it. Closed? Sam, we'd be cut off except for a few county roads, half of which don't lead anywhere. Tony must be mistaken."

"No, I don't believe so, Ches."

Chester reached across the desk toward the phone. Sam stopped his hand. "If you're calling the highway department, play it like you've known all along, but you just want a verification of the date."

The older man arched one eyebrow. "You know something I don't, Sam; something maybe I should know?"

"Could be. Humor me."

Sam received an odd look, then Chester dialed the number of the District Headquarters of the State Highway Department, located in the eastern part of Fork County. He talked for several minutes, then hung up, a puzzled look on his face.

"We were notified back in March, according to Wayne. The county board requested the closing to repair the bridges. They were supposed to notify the citizens. Wayne says the mail will be picked up by the sheriff's department and taken by patrol car to the north bridge, then transferred to a regular mail truck. The deputy will bring back any mail for Whitfield. It's all been okayed by the post office."

"And the board is composed of—?"

"Karl Sorenson, Dalton Revere, Paul Merlin, Otto Stockman, and Max Steiner. Wayne says he has a public notice from the *Crusader* on his desk. The notice ran for six weeks. Excuse me, Sam, but it's damn funny I didn't see it!"

"It never ran in the paper," Sam said glumly, an idea of what might be happening taking better shape in his brain. He did not like what he was thinking, but for now, kept his ideas to himself.

"He has the notice on his desk," Chester objected.

"He has a notice. It could have been printed anywhere,

and probably was."

"But why, Sam?"

The minister shook his head. He fumbled in a desk drawer until he found attendance records—a graph he'd been keeping since March. "Look here, Chester," he laid the graph on the desk. "December through the middle of February we had a two percent increase in church attendance. The last two weeks of February we began to slide a bit. By the first of April, that slide had increased to a five percent loss, then a ten percent loss by the last of April. May, it was down to twenty-five percent. Last month, almost fifty percent. I'll predict that by this Sunday, there won't be forty people in church, and most of them will be elderly."

"I thought it was just a fluke," Chester said, sighing. "Summer's here, vacation time. But that's not it, is it, Sam?"

"No, Chester, it isn't." Sam put his hand on the phone to call an old friend and pastor of the largest Christian church in the state.

"My kids," Chester said, then let the words trail off into silence.

"What about your kids?"

The church elder shook his head. "Nothing, Sam. Forget it. Who are you calling?"

"Chris Farmer up in North Platte. You know him—he held our revival last year. As soon as I dial, you pick up the extension in the nursery. I want you to hear this."

Popping noises for a few seconds, then the ringing. The two ministers chattered for a few minutes, then Sam asked the man about his church attendance.

"Couldn't be better, Samuel. I'm up nine percent from this time last year. People are coming back to Jesus. Going to be a great year for religion, my boy—a great year. I can feel it in my bones, and loving every minute of it."

Sam congratulated the minister, chatted for a few more minutes, then hung up. He called to Chester, "Stay in the nursery, I want you to hear all these calls."

Sam called the Christian church in four directions, two states. He got the same reply: business was booming! Religion was pulling the folks in the front door. Great!

Chester came in, sat down. "You called in all directions, Sam, and you got the same answer. Religion

is not just doing well, it's wonderful. But why isn't it wonderful here in Whitfield? I know from talking to people it's down in all the churches in town. Why?"

Sam slowly shook his head. "Who is minding the store?" he asked abruptly.

"I closed it. Only had one customer all day, and that is really strange for this time of year. Wish I could figure out what's keeping people out of town."

A force, Sam thought. A very evil force. "You keep guns at your house, Chester?"

The man smiled. "Sam, I run a sports shop; the only one in town. Sure, I keep guns at my home. I'd hate for the Treasury people to check me."

"Will you do something for me?"

"Of course, Sam."

"Go home. Make sure your guns are loaded—check them. Bolt the doors and secure the windows. And after dark, don't leave the house."

He received a curious look from his friend. "You feel all right, Sam? Did you have a good lunch? You did eat?"

"I had a very good breakfast at Jane Ann's. I threw it up later. No lunch, and I'm not hungry. I feel fine."

Correction: I am in control of my senses: that's what you're really asking. Please don't argue, Ches. Humor me for a time. Maybe I'm wrong—I hope I am. But for now, go on home and look after things. I'll be in touch."

Chester nodded, rising to his feet. "All right, Sam. I won't question you about it. But you will tell me what's going on—soon?"

"Yes."

Sam drove out to the local Ford dealership. It was pure impulse on his part. He liked the feel of the Mercury he drove, but he felt it was not the vehicle he needed—for whatever lay ahead of him—and he was growing more certain in his suspicions. He might regret his actions later; he might feel like the biggest fool in two states—he hoped he would—but for now, he felt he was doing the right thing.

As he drove the short distance, Sam noticed one thing that only compounded his suspicions and dread: there was no one on the streets. The town was silent at four o'clock in the afternoon. A shiver of fear touched him.

"Friday," he muttered. "They're preparing for this evening's worship."

You're letting your imagination run away with your common sense, he told himself. Be logical.

But his words did little to calm him.

As he pulled into the dealership, he knew he was doing the right thing.

How do you know? he questioned his mind.

And the answer came back: I know.

Peter Canford walked out of the dealer showroom to greet him. "Preacher," the young man said. "Glad to see you." They shook hands. "I was beginning to think the town had forgotten us. You're the first customer today."

"That's odd."

"Sure is. It's kind of spooky, really. What can I help you with?"

"I—uh—want to trade cars, Jimmy. I'd like to have a pickup truck. Preferably one that is already broken in. I want to trade this Mercury in for it. My car's paid for."

The young salesman scratched his head. "Well, I'm told never to argue with the customer, Reverend Balon—"

"Sam," he corrected, smiling. "And my mind's made up. I want to buy a pickup truck. One that will take some rough driving over some bad terrain."

"Right," Peter grinned. "Sam. I forgot. Okay, I have one you might be interested in. It's a year old. Only has a few thousand miles on it. We got it from a fellow over at Ridgewood. Or rather, we got it from his wife—they split up. It's a fancy one, Sam; got all the equipment and more. Extra gas cans, if you want them. Big tank, winch. I mean, it's got it all. Let's go look at it."

Sam sat in the pickup, feeling less a fool as time ticked past. He inspected the engine, kicked the tires.

"I like it, Peter."

"Going to do some fishing this summer?"

"Might have to," Sam said. "Put some food on the table. What with us being cut off for a week."

"What?"

Sam told him about the bridges, suggesting it was only a rumor, unfounded.

Peter shook his head. "I haven't heard a word about it. Probably just a rumor, like you said. You want to drive this truck?"

Sam did, around the lot, then said, "Make me a deal, Peter."

The salesman had looked at Sam's Mercury while the

minister was driving the truck. He figured for a moment, then handed Sam a piece of paper. "That's the best I can do, Sam."

Sam glanced at the figures. "Fine, I'll take it." And the pickup was his. He smiled as the words "for better or for worse" entered his mind.

Jimmy was thinking: it's a shame. A nice man like Sam Balon, with a wife that's running around on him. With an elder in his own church, too. He almost told Sam to go out and get a big stick, go home, and beat his wife's butt.

Instead, he said, "Sure is something about John Benton. How old was he?"

"Fifty, I think. Have you heard when the funeral will be?"

"Two o'clock Sunday. I heard the council just appointed Jimmy chief of police. Tough way to get a promotion. It's odd, though."

"What is?"

"Well—it's a small town, Sam. News travels fast. I heard about the trouble at Jane Ann's last night, and about John firing George Best."

"So?"

"Walter Addison just hired George this afternoon. Made him a county deputy. John wouldn't have liked that."

Everything is beginning to add up. "Let's sign the papers, Peter."

Fifteen minutes later, the men stood by Sam's newly acquired pickup, chatting. The reception inside the dealership had been cool. None of the other employees had bothered speaking to Sam, and their looks were sullen.

"What's wrong with those people in there?" Sam asked.

"I don't know, Sam, but it's sure embarrassing. They've been acting funny for a couple of weeks. Now they treat me as if I'm not around. I'm just ignored. It's getting worse each day."

Sam knew Peter was a devout Catholic, but he wasn't sure about his fellow workers. He didn't know how to ask without being obvious about it.

"Maybe they resent your church work, Peter?"

Peter's look was thoughtful. "It's funny you should say that, Sam. A lot of those guys in there—the women, too—used to be good church workers. Different churches, of

course, but they all went to church. Then, I guess, oh, maybe two-three months ago, one by one they started drifting away from their church. Now none of them attend services. As a matter of fact, they belittle religion; make fun of it. I don't like that, Sam. I've noticed something else, too, for the past few weeks or so, everyone of them show up for work on Friday wearing those funny-looking medallions around their necks. You've seen them? Fad, I suppose. Probably started out in California with all this rock and roll music."

Don't count on that, Sam thought, remembering the medallion his wife wore about her neck—every day. "Memphis," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Sam smiled. "I said Memphis. I think rock and roll began in Memphis, Tennessee. But I believe it was a New York City disc jockey who coined the term rock and roll."

"You like rock and roll, Sam?" doubt in his voice.

"No," Sam laughed. "Not very much of it. You have a cigarette, Peter?"

"Sure. I didn't know you smoked, Sam." He held out a package of Lucky Strikes.

"I don't very often," Sam bent his head to take the light from Peter's Zippo. "Habit I picked up in Korea."

"Hey! You were in Korea? I was in the service, too, but not in Korea. I was Navy. You?"

"Army. Special troops. We were known as UNPIK."

Peter whistled. "Yeah, I heard about you guys. Guerrilla fighters. Rough outfit. How long were you in Korea?"

"Too long. 'Bout sixteen months."

"You saw your share. It's like I always say, don't judge what a person is by what he does for a living."

Sam smiled in memory, glad for a moment to talk and think about something other than whatever it was that was wrong in Whitfield. "Right. We had a former ballet dancer in our outfit. Some guys from another unit—football types—thought he was a pansy. One night they came right out and called Jon a queer. Very bad mistake on their part. Jon invited them both outside. He put both of them in the hospital; almost killed one of them. After that, people walked light around Jon. He was probably the most in-shape person I've ever seen. He could stand

flat-footed and jump over a jeep."

Peter chuckled. "What's the old saying about having to get some people's attention? The mule and the 2 by 4?"

"Right!" Sam laughed.

Peter looked at the minister's rugged profile in the light of afternoon, thinking: I'd hate to have you come down on me, preacher. You look like you could chew nails and spit out tacks. Guerrilla fighter. Never would have guessed it.

Sam climbed into the truck, cranking the powerful engine. "See you, Peter. Tell you what, maybe we'll get together next week. Talk about the service."

"Hey! I'd like that. Sure, we'll do that."

Sam drove away, lurching and bucking for a couple of blocks, until he got the feel of the manual transmission. He drove out of town for a few miles, then cut off onto a gravel road, putting the pickup through its paces, liking the feel of it.

At the dealership, Peter looked behind him, sensing eyes on him. The shop foreman stood a few yards away, staring at him. "Artie," Peter said.

The shop foreman turned his back, the sun catching the medallion about his neck, the rays bouncing off the metal. The foreman looked around, then spat contemptuously on the gravel. He stalked back into the garage.

"Something sure is weird around here," Peter said, as a tremor of fear touched him with light fingers. He shivered in the warm afternoon. "I wish I knew what was wrong with these people."

Sam drove back into town, once again observing the absence of human traffic on the streets and sidewalks. Walter Addison drove past. Sam waved a greeting. The sheriff did not return the salute. George Best sat beside him in the car. The ex-city cop turned deputy laughed at Sam.

"Laugh, punk!" Sam muttered through gritted teeth. "But you're the one who tipped me off."

Punk? Sam thought. How long since you used that word? And how very unpreacherly of you to use it now. Or is it?

Sam parked beside Michelle's car as she came out of the house, standing on the back porch, looking at the pickup with disapproving eyes.

"You going to call on shut-in's in that thing, Sam?"

Her words irritated him. "Some preachers ride motorcycles," he countered, getting out of the truck.

"Your—congregation," she stumbled over the word, "should be thankful for small favors, I suppose." She walked back into the house, banging the screen door behind her.

Wonder where she went this afternoon? Sam mused, as the image of his wife and Dalton Revere crawled through his brain, creeping like a slug. This time, though, the vision did not disturb him, as the memory of his wife's filthy room assailed his brain, bringing back the odor of evil.

She'll be leaving this evening, Sam thought, as he leaned against the truck. If what I suspect is true—and God, I'm praying to You that it isn't—she'll be leaving at sundown.

And if it's true, God, what do I do? Whom can I trust?

In the kitchen, Sam looked at the stove. Cold.

Nothing had been fixed for dinner. So what else is new? We used to have dinner at seven—when she was cooking. Then, a few months back, she began fixing sandwiches. Then she stopped doing even that much.

Sam fixed a sandwich, poured a glass of milk, and walked into the living room, snapping on the radio to listen to the news.

The evening news held no interest. President Eisenhower played a round of golf. The Russians rattled more verbal sabers. Castro condemned the U.S. Guerilla fighting in Africa.

Sam turned off the radio, then sat listening to his wife moving about in her bedroom. She'll be carrying a small overnight bag when she leaves, he guessed. In it will be the black robe and the necklace, and only God knows what else.

Devil worship! My own wife. How she must hate me.

He chewed the last of his sandwich, drained his milk, put his head back, and closed his eyes. What can I do? he questioned his mind. Could I—can I—help her? Do I want to help her?

The silent reply came as no surprise to him. No! No, he really did not wish to help her. For she is as in Job: One who rebels against the light.

What are you doing to me, God—testing me? If so,

you've picked a poor, weak man, for here I sit like a hypocrite, lusting after a member of my congregation and refusing to help my wife in her moment of need.

A line from Psalms entered his mind, shaming him. The Lord knoweth the thoughts of man.

Sam rose from the chair, walking through the house to Michelle's bedroom. She was just coming out, closing and locking the door behind her. The medallion about her neck caught Sam's eye.

"Michelle—"

"I really don't have time to talk, Sam. I'm playing bridge and I'm running a bit late. Do you mind? Excuse me."

"Michelle, I'd like to help you. Talk to me."

"Help me, Sam? I don't know what you're talking about."

"What's in the bag, Michelle? Decks of cards?"

She smiled at him. "Gifts for the winners, Sam. That's all."

He fought back an impulse to scream at her: Don't lie to me! He resisted another impulse to strike her; to turn her over his knee like a child and spank her butt.

Yet another thought came to him: But I don't want to touch her. She's evil.

"Bridge, Michelle? Gifts? I thought your club met on Tuesday nights?"

Her gaze was cool, tinged with black hate. It was now very easy for Sam to read her. For months she had been making up one excuse after the other to leave the house on Friday nights, and he had believed her. Sucked the bait in like a big bass.

"This is another club, dear. Tonight I play partners with Pat, in a tournament in Atwood. I have to pick up Pat and Ethel and do a few things before we leave. I won't be in 'till very late, so don't wait up. Now, are we all through playing twenty questions—?"

Only one, he thought, looking down at her, as sudden wild rage filled him: when will the restraint leave me and I smash your lying face?

"No, Michelle—no more questions."

"Good. Bye, now." She walked out the back door, the overnight bag swinging at her side.

He listened to her back out of the drive, then he walked swiftly through the house to stand at the open

front door, watching her drive away. He stepped out on the porch, in the quiet of late afternoon. The sun was blood-red, beginning its descent in the west.

Sam's eyes swept the neighborhood, suddenly honing in on the Steiner house across the street. A shade was quickly pulled down, but not so quickly that Sam did not see Mrs. Steiner staring at him, her face pale. Again, he felt that aura of evil hanging around him. He tried to shake it away, but the feeling persisted, hanging to him, refusing to leave.

He looked again at the Steiner house, thinking: there is a perfect example of why I believe—No! I know something is dreadfully wrong in this town. Max and Irene Steiner had always been good friends with Sam and Michelle. Then abruptly, all socializing had ceased. No explanation, and Sam had tried many times to find out why. The Steiners would not speak to him.

Would not speak to me, he thought, still staring at the house across the street, but I've seen them carry on lengthy conversations with Michelle. It's all beginning to fit, each piece forming the outline of the puzzle.

He walked back into the house to sit on the edge of his easy chair, his mind busy assimilating the facts—and he liked none of them. Atwood was almost sixty miles away, and he could recall no time that Michelle had ever played cards there. The only cards that Pat ever played was stud poker with the boys at her father's ranch. Not a bridge player—like most enlisted men in the service—Sam had played pinochle; bridge was the officer's game—nevertheless, he knew it took a certain degree of intelligence to master the game, and Pat didn't have enough sense to come in out of the rain. She was a spoiled, arrogant, round-heeled brat. Thirty years old, going on fifteen. Sam disliked her intensely, able to see through her facade the first time he'd met her. He had often wondered why his wife liked her.

Now he knew.

Sam was wary of people who fought the natural aging process; who refused to act their age; who followed the dictates of fashion with all the harsh discipline of a monk.

He had had friends in this town who, when he first met them, were rational, thinking adults, enjoying the comforts of approaching middle age, who were neither

trend-setters nor trend-followers. Sam had watched them make fools of themselves, in his opinion, emulating each new whim of youth—in music, in dance, in dress, in behavior.

Sam was no follower of fashion. He marched to his own drummer.

He rose from his chair, walking through the house to the kitchen, late afternoon sunlight dancing weakly on tiny dust particles stirred by his movements. He was angry, impatient, irritable, restless.

Sam slammed the screen door on his way out, got into his truck, and drove downtown. Big hands resting lightly on the wheel, the left window open, his arm propped there, the wind ruffling his unruly hair. His square jaw was set in resolution. He would follow his wife—or Pat—if he could find either of them, and see for himself just what was going on.

He drove the town streets without catching sight of either of them.

He headed out of town. There was only one way to Atwood, and Sam drove that route, finally pulling off onto a dirt road, driving up a small hill into a clump of cottonwoods. Here, he had a full view of the road, and unless someone looked directly at him, he could not be seen through the stand of trees. He waited.

This was the way to the Dig site, some miles down this road, if one bore to the left at the next crossroads. To the right, was the way to Tyson's Lake.

He waited for a half hour, until the first shadows thickened and day began melting into evening. The first car down the road belonged to Dalton Revere, but Sam's knowing smile faded when he saw Dalton's wife sitting beside her husband, another couple he could not make out in the back seat. Then it was a steady flow of cars and trucks, his wife's Chevy and Pat's Cadillac among them, all the vehicles filled with people. Addison and his deputies—their wives. The Steiners and the Conways and the Pipers. Hundreds of people, adults and teenagers and young kids. Chester's kids, Jack and Ruby. But no old people. He saw the Barlows and the Vaughns—dozens of people he once called friends. Several ministers among the flow of people.

"Going to church," he muttered. "But not the church they were brought up in." He sighed, sitting behind the

wheel of his truck. "Okay, Balon—now what do you do?"

His first impulse was to follow the line of traffic, but some inner warning stopped his hand as he reached for the ignition key. He waited, unseen in the stand of timber, the sun to his back.

Obviously, he thought, this has been going on for some time. If so, why haven't I noticed it before?

Because I wasn't looking for it, he answered his own question.

After all the cars and trucks were past, and he guessed there would be no more, he cranked his pickup and pulled swiftly away, without lights for the first few hundred yards. Fifteen minutes later, he pulled into Chester's driveway.

The male protector welled up in him as Sam first thought he would not tell Faye or Jane Ann what he had just seen. He would speak to Chester alone. But he quickly rejected that idea. The Stokes were not just strong people, they were strong Christian people, as was, Sam knew, Jane Ann.

When Sam walked into the house, he could feel the tension in the room. Faye had been crying, her eyes red. Chester stood in the center of the den, fists balled in anger. Jane Ann's face was pale.

"What's wrong?" Sam asked.

"Something awfully funny is going on in this damned town!" Chester said harshly. "First time my kids ever pulled anything like this, but they did a good job of it."

Faye began crying. Jane Ann went to sit by the older woman's side, putting an arm around her shoulders, comforting her.

"Where are your kids?" Sam asked, knowing perfectly well where they were, but wanting to find out just how much Chester knew, or suspected.

"Both of them left the house after—after I caught them in Jack's room. They were fondling each other. My own kids!"

Jack was seventeen, Ruby fourteen.

Faye shuddered once, then stood up, pulling her tattered emotions under control. "I'll get you some coffee, Sam. And a sandwich. No, don't argue. I know you probably haven't eaten. Come along, Jane Ann."

Chester sighed, then walked to a cabinet, taking out a bottle of bourbon. He poured a shot glass brimful.

Smiling ruefully, he said, "Bottle of this stuff usually lasts me a whole year." He glanced at Sam. "I'm not much of a drinker. Hope you don't mind me taking a belt?"

"Go right ahead, Ches. As a matter of fact, you can pour me a knock, if you will."

After a quick, startled glance at his minister, Chester poured a second shot glass full. "How long's it been since you had a drink, Sam?"

"Of hard stuff? Years. I like a beer every now and then, though. It helps me to relax."

The sports store owner and the preacher clinked glasses, then downed the amber liquid. Sam puffed out his lips. "Whew! Well, I *used* to like the stuff."

Chester capped the bottle, replacing it in the cabinet, closing the doors.

"You want to tell me what happened, Ches?"

He motioned for them to sit down. "I should have seen all this coming, Brother Balon. I guess I *did* see it, but just wouldn't admit it was happening. I suppose I have to say it's my fault."

Sam wanted to tell the man it most certainly was not his fault, but he kept silent. He couldn't, as yet, tell him where he had just seen his kids—and most of Whitfield

"I knew Jack and Ruby had been cutting church services for weeks. They've been behaving—well, strangely, I guess, for some time. I almost told you at the church this afternoon. Anyway, after I came home, I puttered around the house for a while, then checked my weapons and the locks on the doors and windows. Faye and Jane Ann were in the back yard, working in the flower garden. I passed Jack's room and he and Ruby were . . . moaning. You know, sexually. I listened for a moment, then blew my top. Practically tore down the door. I caught them both naked—uh—fondling each other on the bed. They were—uh—pretty close to actually—doing it." The man paused, tears in his eyes.

"My own kids, Sam! I was so ashamed. But there's more. I tried to punish Jack—took my belt to his bare ass. I marked him several times before he got up. He's a big boy, seventeen. He hit me. Knocked me down on the floor. Oh, Sam, I could have beaten him half to death. I was a champion boxer in the amateur ranks in this state and Regimental Champ in the Corps. I'm in good shape. But I was so shocked at what had happened, I just lay on

the floor looking up at him. I wasn't hurt physically, but I was so disgusted and sick at my stomach. And, Ruby, Sam—oh, Lord. She jumped around, yelling for him to kick me, smash my face, kill me. KILL ME, Sam! My own daughter!" He shook his head. "You read about it happening in the papers, you hear about it on the news, but you never think it can happen to you.

"Go on, Ches."

"Well, they both packed a few things and walked out of the house. Faye was crying, Janey was crying, I was crying—it was a mess, Sam. Both of them said they were sick of our goody-goody ways. Sam, I'm not a prude! But I don't know what's going on in this town. My kids cursed me; called us all things I never expected to hear from a kid's mouth. Especially my kids." He looked at the carpet. "I thought we'd raised two good kids. I guess I was wrong."

Faye and Jane Ann brought in coffee and sandwiches. The sandwiches looked good to Sam, as did the coffee.

Faye said, "I've noticed—we've both noticed—that Jack sometimes growls in his sleep—like an animal. It's frightening, Sam. And it's disgusting!"

Sam swallowed a mouthful of ham sandwich. "How long has this been going on?"

"About ten days," Chester said, looking up. "Maybe two weeks. I'll tell you something else, too, Sam. All their friends have changed. Boys and girls. Boys and girls, hell! Young men and women. They're—I don't know—different, somehow. Arrogant. No! They're more than that—they're smart alecks. I've noticed it at the store. And they're not clean, Sam. It's as if they don't bathe. They smell! And so do a lot of adults around town." He pounded his fist on the coffee table. "Damnit, Sam! What's happening?"

The memory of Michelle's room came rushing to the minister. He put down his sandwich, appetite gone.

Chester said, "All this has taken place, I believed, in the past few weeks. But now, looking back, I can see where I missed some subtle changes in my kids, this town, everybody except for a few of us and—and the elderly of Whitfield. I tried to convince myself it was all my imagination, but I know now it wasn't that at all."

"Why didn't you come to me with your suspicions, Ches?"

The man shook his head. "And tell you what? You'd have thought me a fool."

"No," Sam shook his head. "No, I wouldn't have." He looked at Faye. "Did either of you try to stop them from leaving this afternoon?"

"Yes, we did. They both warned us we'd better not stand in their way. I think we were too shocked to do anything."

"Sam?" Chester asked. "What's going on?"

"Something . . . very evil, I believe. And I don't know if we can stop it." He told them where he had seen Jack and Ruby and three-quarters of the town earlier.

"But where were they going?" Jane Ann asked.

Sam hesitated for a few seconds. "Let me think on this for a while." He stood up. "I'll get back to you all—soon."

"Sam?" Chester rose, facing his minister. "You said evil. Could you be wrong?"

"Perhaps. I pray God I'm wrong, but I don't believe I am."

EIGHT

One by one, the men, women, and children repeated the odious pledge. "I renounce God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost."

The Beasts growled their approval and those already of the Coven nodded and hummed their agreement.

"I renounce and deny my Creator, the Holy Virgin, the Saints, Baptism, Father, Mother, Relations, Heaven, Earth, all this world contains that is good, pure, and sacred."

The stench of unwashed bodies filled the cooling air of this summer night on the prairie of Fork County. This Friday night.

"I give my body and mind to the Church of the Fifteen and to Lucifer. Praise be his name! He is my Master! Praise his Beasts! This I say to his agent, before whom I stand, as I pledge to reject every decent thought I ever possessed."

The Beasts of the Coven howled their agreement, slobbering from fanged jaws, eyes wild with excitement. It would not be long, only days, and the hunt would begin; this they were promised by the Master.

Black Wilder looked over the members of the Coven. A very beautiful woman, her black hair shining, stood by his side. Nydia. The witches—those who had always been—wore their necklaces of feathers and bones, in praise of their Master. A few more days, Wilder thought—a week at the most—and the Coven would be complete. The timetable was on schedule. The Lord of Flies would be pleased.

Yet, Wilder frowned—and he knew Nydia picked up on his thoughts, for she stirred at his side—Balon was going to be trouble. The Christian minister would have to be dealt with—and soon. Yes, Balon would have to die. But, Wilder knew, from centuries of experience, killing him would not be easy.

"No, it won't," Nydia muttered softly.

Wilder knew that, although Balon was not without sin, he was close to God. Balon was a warrior, and God liked His warriors. No, Balon would not be easy, for God could and would protect him—for a time.

The old French priest, Dubois, would be easy because of his advanced age. The Methodist, Lucas Monroe, would be easy, too. He was very old, and already dying. Haskell, of the

Episcopal Church was, like Balon, young. But he was not nearly as tough as Balon. He could be dealt with easily enough.

But Balon . . .

"He can be handled," Nydia said. "When it is time."

Wilder ignored her.

There were others, of course, Wilder mused, but he was not alarmed. Those he would have hunted down by the Beasts or the Undead when it was time. Those who chose to resist his Master's will would die—very unpleasantly. All of them. Then, with that done, his Master would have a home here on earth. By day, Whitfield would appear normal by this earth's standards and time. Just another sleepy little town. Visitors would be discouraged. New growth could be held to a minimum, and any new people could easily be swayed into accepting the Master.

Wilder smiled briefly. Mortals were such fools! Offer them what they cannot have, or what their religion forbids them, and ninety percent of them come scrambling to reach what is denied them by their God. Falling prey like rabbits to a trap.

Wilder's smile faded as he sighed in remembrance. How many times in the past centuries had he tried to set this up? Dozens? Hundreds? He had succeeded but a few times. Long by earth standards, but a mere blinking of the Master's eye.

Damn You, God! Wilder silently cursed. Damn You! This time, though, I believe I'll win, for You waited too long to act. You put too much faith in Your human subjects. I believe You forgot how weak they really are. Yes, this time, I'll beat You.

But he was weary of the game; tired of it all. Perhaps it was time for a younger man. Wilder did not know how old he was. As old as time; certainly as old as sin. His memory spanned centuries and more. The Flood. Sodom and Gomorrah. So much. So long. And he was tired.

Wilder, dressed in a dark robe, ceased his ruminations and picked up a huge black book. No mortal being could have held its weight, for the book contained the names of every human being who had adopted the Godless teachings of Satan and his followers. From the beginnings of time.

One by one, the new applicants to the Coven laid hands on the book, each one repeating after Wilder, "I promise to use all my power to induce others into the worshipping, praising, and revering of the only true Master and his Church of the Fifteen. I am now his slave. Do with me as you will."

The new members of the Coven then defiled themselves with words of filth and profanity, calling out to the Coven, describing in the most disgusting of detail what they would permit upon their persons and their minds. Stripped naked, they allowed the members of the Coven to physically possess their bodies, without regard to male or female gender, while the Beasts—the lowest in the order of Satan's disciples—howled and snarled, dancing around the couplings, the sodomy, the sucking, and the degradation.

Slim Wesson whoaed his horse and cocked an ear, listening to the sounds from just over the sand hills. This was Little River Range, only a fence separating it from Karl Sorenson's K/S spread. K/S or L-R, Slim had never heard anything like this droning sound—never in his life. Whatever in the hell it was—and he could not know how apt his choice of adjective—it wasn't supposed to be on this range.

"Bunch of damned beatniks!" he mumbled. "Havin' a party. Dope fiends, I bet. I told Herman something was wrong around these parts."

Herman had agreed with Slim, that something was wrong, but he didn't know what it was. Slim wished Herman were here, now, for he suddenly felt uneasy, like when he was a little boy, walking past a graveyard. He could whistle then, but something warned him he'd better not whistle now.

Slim dismounted, ground-reined his horse, and slipped quietly up the hill. He'd been riding fence all day, repairing it when broken, and he was tired. He'd missed evening grub because his horse had tossed a shoe, and fixing that had taken some time. But more than tired, Slim was still pissed-off at the attitude of most of the guys he worked with at L-R. He was thinking of handing in his notice and walking. Loading up his pickup and maybe heading north, up into Wyoming. He'd heard there were good jobs up there for cowboys who still gave a day's work for a day's pay. Yep, that's what he'd do, by God, he'd drift up north.

The guys at L-R, he couldn't figure them out. They kept tryin' to get him to join some kind of club. Diable, or something like that. Well, piss on them! Ole Slim wasn't about to join no damn club that meant the devil. He wasn't no fool! Some kind of silly college-boy club, more than likely. Now his friends wouldn't even speak to him. They were crowding him out; laughing at him behind his back. Well, okay, but he'd still do his job and then draw this pay. Then

he'd drift up north.

Slim climbed the fence to K/S range, trudging up another hill, the noise growing louder. He was tired, but all weariness left him as he gazed upon the sight in front of him, illuminated by torchlight.

"Good God Almighty!" he whispered, dropping to his hands and knees, crawling to the crest of the hill. "Look at all them naked people!"

Slim had never seen an orgy before—which was what he presumed this to be—nothing more. But he'd read of them. After his eyes became adjusted to the small, torchlit valley, he soon realized this was far more than an orgy.

He picked up the shape of Sheriff Addison, bugging the mayor, Carl Warner. "Queers!" Slim whispered hoarsely. "I got friends who voted for that bastard, too. Wait'll I tell them!"

Squinting his eyes, he found the naked shape of that psalm-singin' do-gooder, Dalton Revere. "My God! That's the preacher's wife. Oh, no!" he watched Michelle Balon pull a naked woman to her. Locked in each other's embrace, the two women and the man slid to the ground, mouths and fingers busy.

Slim wanted to puke.

He also had a slight hard-on.

Soon, the participants lay recovering and defiled on the ground. Slim wanted to run, wanted very much to leave this place, but he felt frozen to the ground.

Coven women went among the sprawled members just beginning their initiation with the Devil. They cut off a piece of each woman's hair, giving that to the Devil's agent, Black Wilder. He placed a few strands of hair in the huge book, beside each name.

Just as I have done for so many hundreds of years, he reminisced. Beginning with the people who lived in the caves.

At midnight, Wilder waved his hand and all became silent. The Beasts stood placidly, jaws lolling saliva, red eyes unblinking, the torches glittering from them.

Slim almost shit his pants when he saw the Beasts up close to the light. If he was not frozen to the earth before, he was now—with fear.

A young girl, in her teens, was led to the altar by her stepparents. She was naked, and offered no resistance. She had been inspected and found to be a true virgin. She was

placed on the altar, a crude stone structure. The girl had been beaten into submission, her young body carrying the marks of the whip. She was spread-eagled on the stone, arms and legs tied down. A huge wooden cross, driven upside down into the earth, stood starkly behind the altar. The crowd began to hum as Wilder, now naked, his manhood huge, crawled upon the stone, between the legs of the girl.

The men and women of the Coven began to dance while the Beasts howled and whined and slobbered. Their dancing was a grotesque, obscene hunching, a filthy expression of perversion of body and soul. As they danced, they chanted, "Prince of Darkness! King of the Night! Monarch of all that is Evil! Lord of the Flies and Beasts! Take this unworthy one!"

And Nydia said, "She could not be convinced to join us. She refused to accept the pleasure of the Master. Take her!"

The young girl screamed as Wilder lunged, his erection driving inside her, impaling her, splitting her. "It's cold—it's cold!" she shrieked.

Other young people stood off to one side, away from the adults of the Coven. They watched, waiting for the signal that would officially begin their night's orgy. Some of them held torches, the flickering flames brightening the site of the altar and the defiling—just begun—of Annie Brown. They smiled. They hummed. They awaited their pleasure, for the only true Master had promised them all the fleshy pleasures of this earth and the next world for them. They had only to serve him. Such a small price to pay for eternal debauchery.

The adults droned their chant, dancing about the altar as Wilder hunched on the teenager, each lunge bringing screams of pain from her throat. He shuddered his finish, and withdrew, as a woman rushed forward to catch his semen in a bowl.

Wilder stepped from the altar, his grotesque maleness swinging between his thighs. He urinated in the bowl, then slipped into his dark robe.

While the mixture was being stirred, the young girl was removed from the altar and a crown of thorns jammed brutally upon her head, the barbs ripping her flesh. She was carried, screaming, to the huge cross, and crucified, spikes driven into her hands, sides, and feet. She was left there, hanging upside down, wailing out her pain. Her blood-filled eyes watched in horror as the Devil's Ceremony continued.

Each new teenager and adult to be introduced into the Coven was brought forward for the final pledge. A tiny

portion of the evil mixture from the bowl was smeared on their lips. They knelt, en masse, naked, in front of Wilder.

While Annie's screaming filled the small torch-lit valley, Wilder asked each new member, beginning with the children, "Do you renounce your parents, all blood relations, all friends not of this unholy Coven, God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, the Saints, and the Holy Cross?"

"Yes," the children said.

"Do you wish to serve Satan with all the growing blackness in your hearts?"

"Yes," they replied in unison, conviction growing stronger in them. They had been introduced to all the sexual perversion known to humankind, and they were anxious to experience more.

"Do you know who I am?" Wilder asked.

"Yes. And we are your servants."

"You are firm in your renunciation of all the weakness of God and Christian religion?"

"Yes!" the children shouted.

"And while I am here on this earth," Wilder's eyes flashed evil, "I am?"

"Our God!" they screamed.

Wilder opened his robe, holding his penis, as the young people rose from their prostration to kiss the icy member. Wilder turned, and they kissed his red buttocks.

He repeated the pledge to the adults, and they agreed, doing as the children had done. The woman lingering at Wilder's maleness, loving it.

Wilder nodded to the beautiful witch standing by the upside-down cross, a knife in her hand, the curved blade gleaming in the light from the torches.

"Nydia," he said. "Let it begin."

The woman with the hair the hue of night smiled as she stood by the tortured young girl, hanging upside down on the cross. Slowly, very methodically, savoring the girl's wailing, Nydia began cutting her flesh. She cut obscene tracings on Annie's skin, until the girl was nothing but a bloody rag, screaming out unbearable pain. Nydia chanted as she worked, calling upon all the forces of darkness, of evil, of filth. The ancient rite, as old as humankind, as old as evil, took a long time to conclude. Finally, Nydia cut out Annie's heart, still pumping, and the awful screaming ceased its echoing around the valley of The Digging.

The members of the Coven, hundreds, strong now, old and

new, droned their chant in a tongue formulated in the depths of Hell. They danced around the blood-drenched cross. Dropping their robes, they pranced naked, one by one falling to the ground, to couple as animals; women with women; men with men; adults with children, engaging in every deviant sex act known to exist.

The disgusting, macabre celebration continued for hours, the lustful calling, screaming, grunting filling the night air. The howling of the Beasts, jaws leaking drool, the moaning of the Servants of Satan, all mingled with the glare of the torches jammed into the earth, casting leaping shadows about the valley of the circle, the valley of the tablet, the valley of The Digging.

At predawn, just as first light faintly tinted the eastern sky, the faraway sound of a cock crowing brought the night's abomination to an abrupt close. Black Wilder and Nydia looked about them, fear on their faces. The Beasts huddled together in fright. The devil lives for darkness, afraid of the light, and the devil and his servants are filled with dread at the sound of a crowing cock. Satan can do only quiet, unobtrusive evil in the light of God's sun. It is only in the darkness that the unholiness is nurtured, where it thrives and grows, where the evil is the personification of all that is vile and wicked.

A large owl, perched for hours during the night, beat its wings and hooted, suddenly flying away, its eyes unblinking and evil. It vanished in the dim light, its tiny brain receiving a message from its Master.

As roaches do when the light is clicked on, the members of the Coven scurried away in the dimness of predawn, the evil on their faces mixed with fear, for they know it is God's sun.

The altar had been washed clean. The cross removed and hidden. The body of Annie Brown was not to be seen. The Beasts were disappointed that she could not be used as a breeder, but they knew some things were beyond their grasp, so they accepted without question.

After selected older members of the Coven, those who, although they did not at this time know it, were well on their way to becoming the Undead, had sucked their portion of blood from Annie's still-warm body, the Beasts ate her. Growling, they stripped the flesh from her, snapping the bones to suck the marrow, as they had done with Tim Bennett, weeks back. As the full glory of God's day filled the valley of The Digging, the Beasts slipped into holes in the

earth, making their way back to the caves at Tyson's Lake, past the chosen Sentinel.

Slim Wesson, the cowboy, who, until this moment, believed he had seen everything God meant for him to see, lay on the cool ground of the hill overlooking the valley, and wept unashamedly and openly, something he had not done since childhood. He felt soiled and threatened by what he had witnessed.

After a time, he rose to his feet and staggered down the hill to his horse, still waiting for him. Mounting, he rode off, speaking to the animal. "Bullet, I think we'll get the hell out of this state—pronto!"

The owl soared high above him, watching, waiting.

Slim rode carefully, recalling what he'd seen during the night of sickness. Slim was no prude, but he was physically ill in his recall. He had seen his foreman, Lou Parker. He had seen the owner of Little River, Ray Zagone. He had watched the two men fondle each other, love each other, and then mate with the other's wife.

Slim shook his head. Sick, sick, sick!

And that awful crucifixion of the young girl. God! they cut out her heart.

Slim drew up, dismounted, and vomited on the ground. He did not see the owl swooping down toward him, long talons poised. The owl's charge knocked him down, blood pouring from Slim's ripped forehead. The owl arched in the sky, then made another pass, the talons ripping out Slim's eyes. The cowboy screamed in his sudden red-darkness of pain, falling back against his horse. The animal panicked at the smell of blood and the fear of man, kicking out with steel-shod hooves, catching Slim in the hip, breaking the big bone. He fell heavily to the ground. The owl dipped down, quickly sinking its talons into Slim's throat, ripping the flesh. The blood spurted.

The cowboy quickly bled to death. His horse throtted away, fear rolling its eyes white. It stepped on its reins, annoying the animal. The leather finally broke, and the animal trotted away. Late that afternoon, the horse would wander back to the ranch corral. The men there would look at each other, smile, and remove the saddle. They would rub the animal down, feed it, and stable it.

No one would mention Slim Wesson.

Herman Alario, Slim's best friend, was not present when the horse wandered back. When he asked about Slim, he was

told Slim had drawn his pay, sold his horse to Little River, and pulled out. But Herman did not believe that. Slim wouldn't cut out without telling him goodbye. But he kept his suspicions to himself.

The next day, cowboys would ride out, find Slim's body, and take it to the Beasts.

The Beasts would feast.

Sam had driven slowly home after leaving Chester's. The streets were deserted. He did not see a dog or a cat. But he did feel the evil hanging over the town. His fingers touched the cross hanging around his neck.

He was thankful the parsonage was empty. He had some things he wanted to do, and he could not do them with Michelle there.

Turning on all the lights in the house, leaving each room blazing with light, Sam went up to the attic. A half-remembered phrase had come to his mind during the drive home; something from his days at the seminary. THE KISS OF LIFE AND DEATH. What was the rest of it? He had to find that old textbook. Yes, now he remembered. ONCE TOUCHED, FOREVER HIS. That was it! That secret sect of the devil. Unproven. Not mentioned in the Bible, so professors tended to scoff at it.

Sam prowled the attic, in the dim light from the one bulb hanging from its cord. He searched through the boxes, ripping open the tops with his powerful hands until he found the textbook he sought. A slim volume on Ancient Witchcraft and Devil Worship. He had not looked at this book in years, but he had never really forgotten it, such was its impact on him.

Sam looked at the dusty volume. "Do you hold the secret to this mystery?"

The dust and the cobwebs of the attic clung to him; the attic boards creaked under his weight. A chill fell on him as summer winds blew against the frame house. Sam shivered.

"Don't get spooked, Sam," he verbally reassured himself. "Not this early in the game."

He resisted an impulse to rush from the attic, then forced himself to move at a normal pace as he turned out the light, closing the door, just for a moment engulfed in darkness. But he breathed a bit easier when he was downstairs in the light.

A practiced speed-reader, Sam went through the slim volume in less than an hour, not wanting to read the words,

but forcing himself to do so, liking none of it. The words were disgusting. Vile.

He read: *Without the Beasts, the earth-bound agent of Satan would be hampered in his efforts to secure a home for his Master. With the Beasts, and the Undead, whom he may call out at will, the agent of Satan is almost all-powerful. It is rumored that Satan—with the help of the Beasts—overpowered a small village in Spain in the fifth century and held the townspeople under his control for more than fifty years. (Not substantiated).*

The lights in the den browned out for a moment. Sam looked around, exasperated. The lights brightened.

He read on: *It is reported that the people in a nearby village, with help of the Lord God Almighty, wrested the powerful tablet from the hands of the devil's agent and the witch, Nydia, bringing the reign of terror to an end. The witch, Nydia, is reported to be most beautiful; tempting—one of Satan's favorites. She is rumored to have birthed several Demons, her favorite male partners rumored to be men of God whom she seduced.*

Tablet? Sam pondered. What tablet?

A witch?

He read on: *The devil's agent, who was named Blakkr Villr by the peoples of Scandinavia, surfaced again in the 9th century, in what is now Norway. It is rumored that Satan himself brought down the curse, producing the plagues that decimated that country in the 12th century, so great was his anger at being repelled some three centuries before. (Neither the plague nor Satan's presence can be substantiated, since the sickness hit only very isolated areas).*

The tablet was not seen or heard of again until the 17th century, in France, when the devil's agent, now assuming the role of a Forgeron—a blacksmith—converted the peoples of a village to Satan. The Beasts, surfacing from their holes and caves, ravaged the countryside for several years. Mounted soldiers are said to have disposed of the agent and destroyed the tablet, (the author strongly doubts this claim).

It is said the agent draws much of his strength—in part—from the tablet. Should the tablet be destroyed, so will much of the devil's powers here on earth. For a time. The tablet is inscribed: HE WALKS AMONG YOU. THE MARK OF THE BEAST IS PLAIN. BELIEVE IN HIM. ONCE TOUCHED, FOREVER HIS. THE KISS OF LIFE AND DEATH.

And Sam knew than he must not allow Michelle to touch and kiss him.

He returned to his reading: *The French trapper, Duhon,*

reported sighting Beasts in the new land, shortly after his government found the tablet had not been destroyed and empowered Duhon to bring the tablet to America, thus forever removing it from France. Sam had to smile as he read the name of the Priest who accompanied Duhon. Dubois.

Things were beginning to fall more concisely into place.

Sam put the book aside. He had to admit, grudgingly, the devil, or his agent, certainly picked an ideal spot in Whitfield. The town was all but isolated. One airstrip, owned by Karl Sorenson. No night lights. The spur rail line was thirty miles away, and used only at roundup. No bus service. A state highway that could be easily blocked—as was going to happen very soon—and no one would notice for a week or more. One phone call to the bread and milk companies: bring in enough for a week and forget us. By that time, the deed would be done, leaving, during the day, normal-acting citizens. At night, however, they would be free to prowl, slowly taking over smaller surrounding towns.

Nice and neatly packaged, tied with a red ribbon. Red for Satan.

Communications would be easy for them; the phone company personnel would be among the first to be possessed. Calls could be easily monitored—blocked, rerouted. No one in town had the equipment of a ham operator. The radio station was closed down, all the equipment sold, including the antenna. They could not put out a signal for help.

But how, Sam mused, could the people— hundreds of them—be so easily possessed.

Of course, he smiled: the radio station. Mind implantation. It would be easy over a period of time. The government had experimented with it in the early fifties, both in radio and TV—and it worked. Subtle little messages, sent so fast they could only be perceived by the subconscious mind. Sure, it would be easy that way.

The lights began to flicker, browning out, again and again. Sam looked at his watch. Midnight.

The Black Mass had begun.

Sam took a long, very hot shower, then went to bed, falling asleep almost instantly, his exhaustion finally catching up with him. He was sleeping at dawn when Michelle entered the house, her slight noise at the door awakening him. Through slitted eyes, he watched her stand over his bed, the stench of her almost overpowering. He watched her lips pull back in a snarl, her dark eyes flashing hate at him.

Don't let her kiss you! he silently cautioned.

She walked to him in the dim light, bending down, her mouth only inches from his. Sam deliberately turned over on his back, the silver cross laying on his chest catching the light from the outside, pouring through the open and uncurtained window. Michelle's hands flew to cover her eyes.

Sam felt sick at his stomach.

Quickly, quietly, she backed out of the room, away from the sight of the Holy Cross.

In her bedroom, she carefully locked the door behind her, pulling the heavy black drapes, filling the room with darkness. She stripped naked, her body bearing the bruises of a dozen hands upon her flesh.

She did not wash herself, the thought of water repulsed her. She fell naked on the bed, stinking, her evil permeating the room. She drifted off to sleep as the sun climbed from out of the east. She occasionally snarled in her sleep, drippings from her mouth wetting the already stained pillow. Her dreams were of Sam—always of Sam.

She dreamed of cutting out his heart, listening to him scream. She smiled in her sleep, teeth flashing white in the darkness—like fangs on a snarling animal.

After Michelle left the room, Sam was wide awake, his heart pounding. His nose wrinkled at the odor of unwashed flesh, the musky scent of sex, and of evil, he was sure. He lay still for a time, the smell assailing his nostrils. He now knew the truth, and he did not know what to do with the knowledge.

His wife, Michelle, was one of Them.

He blamed himself for not realizing sooner. He should have known; should have put it all together weeks ago, when he first suspected the evil in Whitfield. The pranks that were played on him; the phone calls with heavy breathing and cursing.

Kids, he had thought. Playing games with the preacher.

Now he knew better.

He rose from his bed, padding softly to the bathroom. He washed his face, brushed his teeth, and ran a comb through his hair. In his room, he dressed quickly. Jeans, pullover shirt, rough-out boots. He checked his watch. Seven-thirty. He wanted to see five people this day: Dubois at the rectory; Haskell at the Episcopal church; Lucas Monroe; Wade Thomas; and Miles Lansky.

If Miles, a Jew, who really did not believe in Heaven or Hell—so he professed—sensed something evil in Whitfield, then something was evil in Whitfield.

And Sam had made up his mind to visit Tyson's Lake. Somehow, he believed, everything was linked to that area. If there was something evil out there, he was going to find it, and if possible, kill it!

Sam pulled a trunk out of his closet, rummaging around in the bottom until his hand touched the cold metal of what he sought. He pulled out a .45 caliber automatic pistol, a box of shells, three clips, and the leather that went with them. He had not touched the weapon in almost five years—except to clean it occasionally. Not since 1953 had he thought of using it. Since Korea.

In the living room, he field-stripped the weapon, cleaning it, oiling it, working the slide action back and forth. He filled the clips, inserted a full clip into the weapon, and left the chamber empty.

Sam suddenly remembered the Thompson Submachine Gun Chester had in his shop. In a vault. Sam made a mental note to speak to Chester about that weapon.

Am I being silly? he questioned.

No! he answered the question.

He put the .45 into leather, fitted the full spare clips into their pouches, attached holster and clip pouches onto the web belt, and wrapped the belt around the holster. He carried it outside.

He was a bit confused for just a few seconds at seeing the pickup in his drive, then the memory of the trade came to him. Peter Canford. He wanted to see Peter, too. Peter sensed something wrong in town.

He looked up and down the street. Nothing moved. Nothing at all.

Sam drove out into the country, into the sand hills, where he practiced with the .45 until he was satisfied he had not lost his eye for shooting and could hit a man where he aimed to hit him.

"Hit a man!" Sam said aloud, shocked at his thoughts. He glanced heavenward, seeking some advice.

None came.

"Is that what it will come down to?" he asked the sand hills. "Man killing?" Only the wind sighed as it moved endlessly across the rolling plains.

Sam drove for a time, crisscrossing ranges. He was stopped just after intersecting with a range road that would take him back to Whitfield.

The cowboy who blocked the road with his jeep was not friendly. "This is Rocking-Chair Range, Balon. Stay off."

Sam, suddenly angry, got out of his truck to face the cowboy. "I've known Paul Merlin for years," Sam said, not realizing he was balling his fists. "I've fished with him. If Paul wants me off his range, let him tell me."

The cowboy was a small, wiry man, his face burned the shade of old leather. But his eyes were strange—dead-looking. The cowboy stood his ground.

I've told you what I was told to tell you, Balon. Now, git! We don't need your kind around here."

"My kind! I'm a minister, man. What do you mean?"

"That'll do, Davy," the words came from behind Sam.

Sam turned to look at Paul Merlin. He did not know where the man had come from, and Sam Balon was not an easy man to sneak up on.

"Paul," Sam spoke a greeting.

"Balon," the rancher spoke the word harshly. "You're not welcome here. Leave now!"

"Paul, I—"

"Get out!"

Something about Paul was out of kilter. Sam realized this as he studied the face. His eyes, like the cowboy's, were dead-looking, the voice flat.

"All right, Paul," Sam said. "I'll leave. Tell your hand to move his jeep."

"Go around it."

Sam resisted a quick impulse to give the rancher a short right cross to the mouth. "Very well, Paul," he fought back his temper. "As you wish."

Sam listened to the men laugh at him as he backed out and around the jeep, almost getting stuck in a ditch. Sam did not know what was going on around this part of Fork County, but he sure intended to find out—soon.

He drove straight to the *Crusader* office, where he knew Wade often worked on Saturday mornings, on personal business.

"Sam!" Wade said, surprise on his face as he answered the knocking on the front door of the newspaper building. He looked at the truck. "You trade cars?"

"Yesterday."

"I like it." The editor smiled, taking in his minister's casual dress and the unshaved stubble on his face. "You going fishing, Sam?"

"Hunting might be a better word, Wade. Can you spare me a few minutes of your time? I need to talk with you."

"For you, Sam—anytime. All the time you want. Hunting? I didn't know you hunted." He paused in his locking of the door after Sam was inside. "There is no hunting season open around here, Sam."

"The season on this animal never closes," Sam said dryly.

Wade gave him an odd look as they walked into his office. But he said nothing about whatever his minister might be hunting in the middle of summer.

"Sit down, Sam," he pointed to a chair facing his desk. "I just made a pot of coffee. You take yours black, don't you?"

"Black as sin," Sam smiled, but there was no mirth in his grin; no humor in his eyes.

Wade picked up on his minister's seriousness. Something is very wrong, he thought. Has Miles's alarm drifted over to

Sam? I won't open the ball, though. I'll let him tell me.

Pouring them coffee, Wade stole a glance at Sam. The man never ceases to amaze me—never ceases to bring out the curiosity in me.

Sam was the only minister Wade had ever known with a combat background, although Sam never talked about his time in Korea with UNPIK. Whatever in the hell UNPIK was! He doesn't look like a minister. Big man. Barrel chested; thick, powerful wrists. Big hands, flat knuckles. Tattoo on his arm. Boxed in college, some say. I can believe it, looking at the size of those arms.

To lighten the mood of the moment, Wade abruptly asked a question he'd been wanting to ask for years. "How many fights did you have, Sam?"

Sam grinned boyishly. "I had too many, Wade. I enjoyed boxing, even though I felt it best to quit when I went into active ministry. Your next question will be, how many fights did I win? I won all of them." He tapped his head. "Thick skull; hard to knock down," his grin widened. "My trainer was appalled when he learned I was a theology major. He couldn't quite correlate boxing with the Bible. Thought it wrong somehow."

"You were a minister while you were in the service?"

"Yes. But the guys didn't know it. Let me clarify that. I had my degree, but I had not yet held a church. I wasn't sure until after the war—or sometime during it—that I really wanted to be a preacher."

The speculation of whatever it was lurking around Whitfield entered Sam's mind, fading his grin. He did not know how to bring up the subject to Wade. Or what to do about it when he did.

Wade watched the changes sweeping his minister's face. "And you didn't think boxing wrong?"

That grin again. "No, I didn't. God liked his warriors."

"You do like the Old Testament, don't you, Sam?"

"Yes, I do. Our nation—the world—would do well to go back to some of those hard Old Testament rules."

Wade arched an eyebrow—a habit he picked up from watching George Sanders movies. "A lot of people—ministers included—might disagree with you about that."

"Good," Sam said, sipping his coffee. "I enjoy a fast debate. I'm a very opinioned minister, Wade. I've been called a maverick more than once, by my own peers. I really don't care, since I know for a fact that many ministers are

notoriously naive about worldly ways. I think going back to the Old Testament might make a better people out of us. Myself, included. I know I could use some hard discipline from time to time."

Interesting thing for him to say, Wade thought. Wonder why he said that? Jane Ann, perhaps. I know he's in love with her.

Wade knew that Sam came from a religious family, but had been a wild one, well up into his twenties. A street fighter; he openly admitted that. Sam's father had been a minister in Kansas City, Missouri. The elder Balon and his wife had been killed in an automobile accident when Sam was fifteen. Sam ran away from his Uncle's home in Iowa, drifting around the country, raising hell wherever he went, until a social worker in California persuaded him to go to college. Then the army.

"It amazes me how well you get along with young people, Sam. My oldest says you're a cool cat."

But not "cool" enough, Sam thought. The youth department at the church has gone from bad to worse to zero. Again, the radio station came to mind. It had to be. Sam could think of no other way it could have been done. But, he recalled, every teacher in the elementary and high school was in that parade of humanity I saw last night, heading out to worship the devil. The radio station and the teachers—a good combination to mold young minds.

"Wade, Jr. is a good boy," the minister said. "He just likes the girls, that's all."

"Would I be asking you to violate a confidence if I asked what you told him that time he talked with you half the night. After you sobered him up, that is," he added dryly.

"No. No violation of any confidence. I just told him if he couldn't keep it in his pants, at least put a rubber on it."

Wade felt his face flush hot. He shook his head. "Sam, you're the darnest minister I've ever met in my life." He fought a losing battle to hide a smile.

"Friend, in this day of blossoming sexual promiscuity among the young—and it's going to get much worse before it levels off—I'm not about to tell a healthy young man to go home and jack off. He'd think me a fool! I have to do what most parents won't or can't do with their kids, mostly boys, and that is tell them about the birds and the bees. It's a job most ministers don't want and are not equipped to handle. It's not our job, although a great many parents seem to think it is. Lucas Monroe told me, last year, a young man said to him

that he didn't want to know about the birds and the bees; what he wanted to know about was pussy."

The editor stirred uncomfortably in his chair, embarrassed at the minister's bluntness. "Damn, Sam!"

"I'm telling you the way it is, Wade. I shudder to think what it's going to be like ten or fifteen years from now. If you think it's a sex-oriented society now, just wait a few more years. The movies, the magazines, the song lyrics, and the books are going to be full of nothing but sex. You wait and see if I'm not correct. But right now, we'd all better get ready to cope with it until we can turn this society around and get back to some plain old decency. And we're going to hit rock bottom before we do."

Wade smiled, a smile many would take for sarcastic, but which Sam knew was not. "I'm getting a sermon on Saturday. What do I get to hear tomorrow, Sam?"

"I haven't written my sermon for tomorrow."

The men stared at each other, Wade thinking: does this have anything to do with the feeling I've had for several weeks? Dwindling church attendance? The strangeness that seems to have overtaken this town? If so, Sam, get to it. Convince me, Sam. Tell me what's wrong. Come on, stop walking around what's on your mind.

But neither wanted to be the first to mention it.

Wade wondered if his minister knew his wife was running around on him with an elder of the church? He decided Sam did, but in his usual manner, was playing it close to the vest.

"How's the paper's circulation, Wade?"

The question caught the editor off guard, startling him. He shrugged. "So, so."

"No one stopping their advertising with you?"

Wade's eyes narrowed slightly. "It comes and goes, Sam."

"Sure."

"Terrible thing about John Benton," Wade changed the subject.

"Awful. The funeral is tomorrow."

"I heard about Jane Ann's trouble. It's very strange."

"I guess you heard about the sheriff hiring George Best, then?"

"The same day? Yes. I suppose Walter had his reasons?"

"Right—whatever they may be."

Wade let that lie for the moment. "Is it true about Chester's kids? Did they leave home last evening?"

"Yes. Yes, they did. Hurt their parents very badly. Wade?

Why did you suddenly send your kids to summer camp in Colorado last week? Wade Jr. told me he was looking forward to working here with you this summer."

The editor sighed heavily. "Because Miles convinced me it was the right thing to do. His kids went, too, you know."

"He wants to see me this afternoon. In private."

"You're not going to like what he has to say, Sam."

"I believe I know what he's going to say, and I agree with him."

Wade slammed his hand on his desk top, suddenly angry. His face was flushed. He rose to stalk the small office, pacing restlessly. "I'm sorry, Sam, but I just don't buy it. I've had time to think on it, and I just don't believe it."

"Miles obviously believes it enough to go against his own religious upbringing. You believed it enough to send your kids out of town," Sam reminded him.

"I panicked. A moment of weakness, that's all."

"Why didn't you or Miles come to me with your suspicions? Why wait?"

The newsman stared at the minister for a few seconds, then sat down behind his desk. "All right, Sam—all right! Enough, okay?" His face was red, a combination of anger and frustration and entrapment.

A minute ticked by while Wade attempted to gather his thoughts. "Miles doesn't know what *it* is," he muttered. "And neither do I, for that matter."

He drummed his finger tips on the desk. "Sam, Miles hasn't been to a temple or synagogue in almost thirty years. Since his bar mitzvah. He was laughing the other day; told me he didn't believe he was a Jew—just Jewish!"

"Sam, I'm going to tell you something in very blunt language, you're on the sheriffs shitlist—you know that?"

"I know."

"You've been snooping around behind his back."

"I sure have, Wade."

The editor sighed, slowly nodding his head in resigned agreement. He rubbed his eyes, then massaged his temples. "All right, Sam. Let's compare notes, okay?"

"I guess my feeling that... something was—is—wrong started with Charlie Bell," Wade admitted. "Sam, Charlie and I go 'way back together. Grade school. Best of friends. We started playing golf back when we were— oh—freshmen in high school, out at the Club. Twenty-five years ago; little

more than that, now. Then, about five-six weeks ago, he became a stranger to me. Cold. I went to him at the bank to talk about financing a new pickup. Over the past fifteen years I've financed six new cars with Charlie's bank. This time, Sam, he turned me down cold—flat. In so many words, he told me to get out of his bank and don't come back. I still haven't gotten over that."

"And you have no idea what might have brought all this on?"

The editor was suddenly embarrassed. "Well—Sam—yeah, I do, sort of. You see, Charlie, about a week before, had kind of suggested—well, talked around the idea of us swapping wives."

The minister did not appear to be shocked. "Like they do out at the Club." It was a statement.

"You and Anita still go out there?"

"No! After I turned down Charlie's offer—well, I would walk in the Club door and conversation would stop. Anita was propositioned every time she went in there; pretty crude stuff, Sam. We resigned our membership." He was thoughtful for a moment. "As a matter of fact, so did Peter Canford, Jane Ann, Chester and Faye. That's about it, I guess."

Sam remained silent, waiting for his friend to continue.

"Then Art Holland pulled his advertising out of the paper. I'd been friends with Art for years—close friends: we were Frat Brothers at the university. Now he won't speak to me. Others began pulling their advertising out, gradually. Then, last week, my ads took a nose dive. Went from bad to zero."

"Have you talked with other editors around the state?"

"No."

"Why?"

"For one thing, Sam, I haven't been out of Whitfield in a month. For another, my national and state ads have been keeping me going—in a manner of speaking. For another, I guess—well, it's the reporter coming out in me." He thumped the desk with a fist, then blurted, "I want to know what in the hell is going on around here!"

Sam told him of Paul Merlin's ordering him off his range that morning.

"That's incredible! Paul is a good, decent man."

Sam told him of the closing of highway 72, north and south, for a week.

"What!?" Wade shouted.

"The state highway department says the notice ran in this

paper for weeks."

"No way, Sam! It has not run in my paper. Closing down? Good Lord, Sam—we'd be cut off here—" The truth came staggering into his brain. "Cut off," he whispered. "Cut off!" his voice was stronger.

"Wade, I want you to think back. Has anybody approached you to join any kind of club, or, oh, cult—that's what I'm trying to say?"

He shook his head. "No. Some of us used to gather at various homes to discuss church business, things for the kids to do. Nondenominational meetings among parents. But we don't do that any longer. Haven't for—I guess a couple of months. You know that. My friends won't discuss anything with me; those people who used to be my friends, that is," he added sourly. He reached for the phone.

Sam's hand shot out, grabbing his wrist, stopping him. "No!" the preacher said.

"Sam? Have you gone crazy? Excuse me, but I want to find out what's going on around here."

"It's too late," Sam's voice held a warning.

Wade gave up attempting to free his wrist from Sam's viselike grip. The man was strong as a bear. He nodded, and Sam released him. Rubbing his wrist, Wade asked, "Too late for what?"

"Do you trust me, Wade?"

"Sure. You know that without asking. Of course, I do. Dumb question."

"Then listen to me for a few minutes—answer a few questions, then make up your mind whether to call."

"All right," Wade leaned back in his chair, a half-smile on his lips. "Sounds awfully sinister, preacher, but I'll listen."

"First give me a cigarette."

"I didn't know you smoked!"

"I don't, very often. Come on, Wade, give me a cigarette."

He tossed a pack of Pall Mall's on the desk. "Next thing I know my minister's going to tell me he drinks, too."

"I had a shot of booze with Chester last evening."

Wade rolled his eyes and grimaced. "Please spare me any more of your vices, Sam."

"Just leave the pack where I can get at it, will you? Ready for this? Okay. Tell me everything you know about Dr. Black Wilder and his crew."

"That's easy. I don't know anything about them! Sam, I'm much more interested in this so-called notice that is supposed

to have run in—"

"Just bear with me a few minutes, Wade," Sam cut in. "Okay? What do you know about the Tyson Lake area?"

"I might be able to help you there. It's been fenced off for years—as long as I can remember. It's full of caves, holes, lava pits."

"You've seen these caves and holes and pits? Firsthand?"

"Well—no, Sam. But someone obviously has, or the place wouldn't be fenced off for public safety."

"Karl Sorenson owns the land?"

"That's right. Been Sorenson land for—oh, over a hundred and fifty years. Maybe longer."

"And the Sorenson's came from—where?"

Wade shrugged. "Scandinavia, I guess."

"Uh-huh. Got a dictionary, Wade?"

"You're asking a newspaper man that?" he grinned. "Sure." He flipped open a large dictionary on his desk, cleverly hidden under a pile of out-of-town newspapers. "What's the word, Sam?"

"Black."

"Black? Just Black?" He received a stare for a reply. "Okay." He thumbed through the pages. "Got it."

"Check the Icelandic spelling."

"Blakkr."

"Now look up wild."

A curious stare, then Wade thumbed through the W's. "All right, got it."

"Icelandic spelling?"

"Villr."

"Put them together in English."

The editor was thoughtful for a moment. "Black Wild. Black Wilder; that what you're getting at? So what?"

Sam told him of the book he'd read. Of Jane Ann's suspicions. Of his own.

"Duhon," Wade muttered. "Yeah, I recall reading about him. He isn't exactly one of the heroes of early Americana, but he did trap this area two centuries ago. Let me think back to my history classes at the university. All right. Duhon, along with a Father—" he stumbled over the word, "Dubois, helped set up the First Catholic Church in what is now Nebraska. Dubois! Father Dubois is our parish priest now." He forced a smile.

"Interesting, isn't it?" Sam returned the forced smile.

"Have you spoken with Father Dubois?"

"Not lately. And not about this, but I plan to—today."

Wade nodded absently. He rose to his feet, walking to a wall lined with books. He selected a slim volume of Fork County history. "Yes, things are coming back to me. Sam, do you know what is purported to have happened to Duhon and the original Father Dubois?"

"No."

"Real fairy tale stuff." He flipped a few pages of the book, found the passage he sought, and read, *The log cabin church was destroyed in the late 1700s. Folklore has it that the church was destroyed by huge, foul-smelling, hairy beasts, who, after destroying the church, ate both Duhon, the trapper, and the priest, Dubois.* He laughed. "Pure hogwash."

Sam said nothing.

"The truth," Wade read on, *will probably never be known, for their bodies were never found, nor was any grave site ever located.*

He skipped a few pages. *"The church was originally built near what is now the town of Whitfield, in an area known locally as Tyson's Lake. The lake was named in memory of two young children, Abe and Martha Tyson, who disappeared near there in the mid-1800's, and were presumed to have drowned.*

Trappers have long avoided the area known as Tyson's Lake, because of the bad smells coming from the small stand of timber, and because of the frequent howling and snarling from the woods.

The author goes on to say the smells probably came from bad water in some of the holes, and the howling and snarling pure imagination and the wind.

"Sure," Sam said. "Right."

This time the editor's smile was not forced. He openly chuckled. "Come on, Sam! You're not going to sit there and tell me you believe in ghosties and ghoulies and things that go bump in the night?"

"Do you believe in God, Wade?"

"Certainly, I do!"

"Then if you believe in God, you have to believe in the devil."

Wade nodded, but refused to elaborate further. He sat behind his desk, a slight smile on his lips, his eyes amused.

"Why did the radio station close down, Wade?"

He shrugged. "I guess because it wasn't making any money. Town's too small. It was always marginal."

"Who owned it?"

"Oh, it's changed hands several times in the past ten years. A media group out of Omaha owned it for years. Then about three years ago—" he paused, his eyes lifting to meet Sam's, "Karl Sorenson bought it."

"And ran it until a few months ago. That's interesting."

"Maybe," Wade was thoughtful. "But I know something that is more interesting, I believe. You know Karl Sorenson?"

"Unfortunately. He's perhaps one of the most profane men I've ever had the misfortune to encounter. Why do you ask?"

"Karl's been spending a lot of time with Otto Stockman."

"That is interesting. And odd. The most profane man in the county spending time with a Baptist deacon. Stranger still, when one recalls it was Otto who urged the new man, Farben, to break with the Ministerial Alliance a couple of months ago. I heard Farben called the M.A. the most useless group in town."

"I remember you telling me about that. I didn't pursue it because I know you don't care for Otto." He grinned. "Or is that putting it too mildly?"

"No, it isn't. I prayed for guidance, Wade; prayed for help and forgiveness because of my dislike for Otto. I recall what Father Dubois told me about Stockman. He said Otto was *too* Christian! He said anytime a mortal man sets himself up as a pure model for others to follow, he's in real trouble. Dubois said he'd known Otto for years and the man had always been a pompous ass. He allowed himself to be placed on a pedestal. Dubois told me a couple of years ago he thought Otto was heading for a bad fall. He didn't elaborate."

"You think Otto has something to do with—whatever you believe is happening here?"

Sam lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "Maybe. Something else, too. Jane Ann told me Annie Brown has disappeared."

"What do you mean, disappeared?"

"Gone. Vanished. Departed. Dematerialized—"

Wade held up one hand. "Enough, Sam— spare me. I know the meaning of the word. I withdraw the question. How do you know she's disappeared?"

"Because Jane Ann checked it out. No one has seen her. Not at church, not at the movies, nowhere. She's just gone."

"Her stepparents?"

"They told Jane Ann she'd gone to visit relatives in Bradville. That's a lie. The girl has no relatives." He related to Wade what Jane Ann had told him. The editor's face expressed his disgust at her stepparent's actions.

"Have you talked with the sheriff?"

"Wade, the sheriff is in this thing up to his neck," He told the newsman what Chester had overheard; all his personal suspicions. "You will recall that Walter has dropped out of the church. Has he been friendly toward you lately?"

"No. No, he hasn't. He's been acting strangely of late. Sam, three-quarters of the people in this town are behaving—well, not normally. Damn it, Sam!" he slammed his open hand on the desk. "Come on straight with me—say what's on your mind."

"Just calm down, Wade. I want to know more about Tyson's Lake."

"Now, what?" he asked irritably.

"Your father was a newspaperman. What did he have to say about that area?"

"My father died when I was seven years old, Sam. I don't remember much about him."

"I'm sorry, Wade. I didn't know."

He shook his head. "No, I'm the one who should be apologizing, Sam. I never told you about him. Sorry I lost my temper. But this . . . thing—this town; it's got me upset and confused."

"Does it bother you to talk about your father?"

"Oh, no."

"Was your dad killed in an accident?"

"Sort of, I guess you could say." Wade seemed evasive.

Sam pressed on. Like a cop who had just picked up a strong lead, Sam felt a tingling in the pit of his stomach. "Sort of an accident, Wade? Where did the accident happen?" He knew the answer before Wade opened his mouth.

The small office was very quiet. Wade's sigh was audible. He kept his eyes downcast. "Not far from Tyson's Lake," he said softly.

"How did he die, Wade?"

Wade's dark eyes lifted to meet Sam's. "You know, preacher, you're beginning to spook me a little. Just a little."

"I'm waiting."

"Sam, from all I've been able to piece together, my dad was a very virile man. Kept himself in excellent physical shape. He ran, he boxed, did calisthenics. The whole bit, and he wasn't afraid of a living thing.

"It was just about this time of the year. Yeah, almost to the date. Dad had been working on some hush-hush story. No, don't look at me like that or ask me what—I don't know. I've

torn up this building, looking for a lead of some kind—any kind. Nothing. No journal, no notes, no nothing.

"Anyway, mother told me, just before she died, that dad had started carrying a pistol whenever he went out there. No one knows why he did it. And no one really knows what happened. Lord knows, I don't. I just vaguely remember the funeral. Closed casket. When I grew older, mother told me dad had been horribly clawed; mangled. Blood everywhere, and not just dad's blood. She said whatever it was that killed him—and the theory at that time was a bear or a puma—had to have died later. Dad's pistol had been fired several times, and he was an expert shot with that .44."

He sighed heavily, as if the telling troubled him. "This is the strange part: dad had dragged himself away from the fence—it was fenced off even then—barbed wire. It's been replaced several times. Dad dragged himself almost a half mile, to an old road. Doctor King—not Tony, his father—told me years later that dad's face was grotesque; so horribly twisted as to be almost macabre, as if dad had been frightened out of his wits. But I can't believe dad would be frightened of anything, or anybody.

"You see, Sam, mother went to her death, seven years ago, still believing dad had been killed by a . . . a . . . whatever it was! That's not true; dad killed himself. Shot himself through the heart. Only two people knew that—until now. Doctor King and me. Now you."

Sam was silent for a moment, thinking of the author's reference to the Beasts. "Could your father's face have been swollen with—oh, infection, perhaps?"

"Well, yes, Sam. You see, that's one of the dark secrets about Whitfield. Very tragic after dad died. Two of the men who helped load dad in the wagon to bring him into town—you couldn't get a car out there—not then, not in those days, had been working on the fence all day. Barbed wire. They had cut themselves on the hands and arms several times; just little cuts, nothing serious. But in handling dad, it seems dad's blood got into those cuts. This is Old Doctor King's theory, remember. Anyway," again the heavy sigh, "the cuts became infected. The men went crazy, Sam. I didn't see them, of course, I was only a child. But I remember the shooting that night. The shouting and the screaming. The townspeople killed them. It was never reported as such, of course. Whitfield, you see, does have its secrets, Sam."

"Who else, Wade?" the minister asked softly.

"You're smart, Sam," the editor's smile was grim. "You put things together real quick, don't you? Yeah, sure, there were others that following day and night. A dozen people—men and women."

"They were all found and —disposed of?"

"No. Two of them ran away into the prairie. They were never found."

"Which way did they run, Wade?"

"Boy! You're like a bulldog, aren't you, Sam? You never give up. They ran toward Tyson's Lake—so I'm told. They were tracked to the fence by bloodhounds."

"And?"

"And? And? There is no 'And?' That's the end of it. They fell in a cave or a hole and died. Period."

"And you believe that crap?"

Wade's reply was soft, almost inaudible. "No." He lifted his eyes. "But, if not that, then what?"

"The Mark of the Beast."

"The Mark of the —what? I beg your pardon, Sam?"

"Let's count it down, Wade. How many people have died, or been killed, or disappeared in that area known as Tyson's Lake? Jane Ann's mother and father. Ex-Chief of Police Kramer. The young kids the lake is named after. The original Father Dubois and the trapper, Duhon. Your father. The two escapees that night, after they were infected. And a dime will get you a dollar that's what happened to Larry and Joan and Annie Brown. Far too many people for coincidence. Some were torn, others mutilated, marked."

"What is the Mark of the Beast, Sam?"

"I don't know, Wade," he said, then hesitated for a moment. Then Sam bared his thoughts and all his suspicions to his friend, taking it from the beginning. He told him everything.

When he came to the part about Michelle bending down to kiss him, and the stink of her breath and her reaction to the Holy Cross, Sam almost lost control. He paused for a short time, getting his emotions under control.

Wade didn't know what to believe or how to react. Coming from another man, the editor would have openly laughed. But this was Sam, one of the most level-headed men he'd ever known. He ran a shaky hand across his face. "Good God, Sam!"

"Yes," the minister said, his voice firming. "I think God is about all we have to count on in Whitfield."

"We'll call the authorities," Wade reached for the phone.

"No, we won't!" Sam said. "It's too late for that."

Puzzled eyes lifted to touch the minister's hard gaze. Wade pulled his hand from the phone. "What do you mean, Sam—too late?"

"I—I believe there is just a handful of Christians left in Whitfield, in this part of Fork, and we're growing smaller in number with each passing hour. I think right now, Wade, we'd better go see Father Dubois. Perhaps he can shed some light on what's happening around here."

Wade's usual demeanor had returned; the reporter's attitude on nearly everything: cynical, doubting. "Sam? You really believe all you've told me, don't you? All this body snatching that's been going on—where are they? Do they prowl the streets at night? Come on, Sam, you're a grown man who is under a terrible strain at home. Now all things can be explained. Surely you don't believe—?"

"I don't know what I believe, Wade. And that's the truth. I need some answers; you need some answers. So let's go find them."

Wade stood up, his ears doubting what he'd heard but willing to go along with his minister—for a time. "Next thing you'll be telling me is that Frankenstein is lurking outside Whitfield."

"Frankenstein is not mentioned in the Bible, Wade. The devil is."

Father Dubois opened the rear door of the rectory. He did not seem surprised to see either Sam or Wade. The old priest smiled. "Come in, gentlemen." He looked at Sam. "I've been expecting you."

The preacher and the editor followed the priest into his small living quarters. Lucas Monroe of the Methodist Church and Father Glen Haskell of the Episcopal Church sat on the couch. They smiled their greetings.

Sam said, "Is this it? The sum total of Whitfield's faith? Us?"

Father Haskell smiled knowingly. "You're here, Sam, so you must have put it all together. You know the answer to your question."

Sam remembered seeing several ministers in that parade of cars the night before. "I know about Jack Anglin and Bert Justis. But the others?"

Lucas slowly nodded his head. "Yes, so do we. Roger Owens and Leon Carson have also joined—Them."

"Them?" Wade sat down without being asked. "You people seem as calm and as certain about this as—death!" He lost his temper. "What is going on!? You people act as though you've known about this . . . this . . . whatever the hell it is all along."

"Calm yourself," Dubois urged him gently. "Now is the time for unity, not panic. As to your question, yes—I believe we all sensed something at about the same time. Except for me, of course—I've known it was here for a long while. What I didn't know was when it would surface."

Wade fumbled in his shirt pocket for a cigarette, lighting it with fingers that trembled despite himself. "This is all a bad dream. Pretty soon I'm going to wake up and return to reality."

Dubois smiled. "Not likely, son. This is reality. I assure you of that."

"May I use your phone?" Sam asked.

"Certainly."

He decided not to call Chester—not yet. He didn't want to let the women in on all of this, not for a while. And if they were being watched—as Sam suspected they were—he didn't

want to alarm the watchers. He dialed Miles' number at the store.

"Miles? I think you better come on over to the rectory. I want you to sit in on this. Five minutes. See you then."

"I'll make more coffee," Dubois said.

"A Jew in a Catholic rectory," Miles said, taking the cup of coffee offered him by Dubois. Miles smiled. "My father always said I had a strange sense of humor."

"Sit down, Miles," Dubois said, returning the smile. "I really don't wear a tail and horns."

"Who does?" the Jew countered.

"Ah," Dubois said. "But for a time, just before the Christian era, do you doubt Jews took Satan seriously?"

"Never too deeply rooted," Miles sat down, sipping his coffee, smiling.

"What are you two talking about?" Wade asked, irritation in his tone.

He was ignored.

"Do you really believe the Book of Job is fiction?" Dubois asked.

Miles shrugged. "I've drifted away from my faith, Michael," he said, calling the priest by his first name. "So I suppose I'm open to real proof."

"But you're here."

"Yes. I can't deny that, can I?"

"But you won't admit Satan is real?"

Miles smiled. "Whatever is happening here in Whitfield may or may not be real. Why doesn't each of us deal with . . . it in our own way and leave religious dogma for some other time?"

Only Wade did not join in the laughter. Sam said, "That's a nice, safe answer, Miles."

"That's all you're going to get out of me. So be happy with that much."

"Jokes!" Wade muttered. "They're making jokes."

Miles glanced around the small room. "I take it save for Chester, Faye and Jane Ann, this is it?"

"And Peter Canford, yes," Sam said. "This is it."

"And the old people, Haskell reminded them all.

"They are gone and don't know it," Dubois said, and all eyes swung toward him. "The strong must survive. That's a very un-Christian thing to say, and I'll pay for it, but it's the truth."

Miles shifted his feet restlessly. He glanced at Wade. "I take

it Sam convinced you where I could not?"

"I didn't say I was convinced," the newspaperman stubbornly held on, "but I'm here."

"But the old people?" Sam said. "They—"

"Drop the subject, son," Lucas spoke gently. "Flagellation won't solve a thing. You'll see what we mean, I promise you."

"Poppycock and balderdash and twaddle," Wade said, folding his arms across his chest.

"Doubting Thomas," Sam said.

"I can't relate to that," Miles smiled, his always good humor breaking through.

"I think," Wade said, "you're all overreacting. And I include myself in that."

"You're very wrong, old friend," Miles said, his grin fading. "And you'll never know what that statement does to me."

"I was shocked at what Sam told me a few minutes ago," the editor admitted. "In my office. But I've had time to think on it. I'm sorry, Sam, but—are you sure Michelle did those things? Or did you put too much into an innocent gesture?"

Father Dubois held up a hand, stilling Wade. "We don't have much time. And we certainly don't have time for bickering among ourselves. Let's tell our stories—compare notes, if you will. Then I'll tell you all the real story." He glanced at Sam. "If you'll begin, Sam."

For the second time that day, Sam told his story, leaving nothing out. When he finished, he felt drained. All the men—including Wade—sat quietly.

Sam glanced at Dubois. The old priest sat quietly, his hands clasped in his lap, a smile on his lips. A sad, knowing smile. His eyes were dark with secrets.

He knows, Sam realized. He knows more than all of us.

Sam shifted his gaze to the Methodist. Lucas wore a worried look, and Sam knew it had nothing to do with his losing battle with cancer. The Episcopal priest sat very still, holding an empty coffee cup in his hands. Miles slowly shook his head, his lips forming a silent aahhh. Wade shifted his feet on the carpet, not convinced.

Lucas said, "I know perfectly well what is happening in this town. I know the evil that surrounds us all. I know it personally, and it frightens me."

"I told you twenty years ago, Lucas," Dubois said. "I warned you then you couldn't outrun your past. Neither can I."

"Yes," the Methodist whispered. "I know. But it's too late for me—I'm dying. But not for you."

"I've got to meet him again," Dubois said.

"What are you two talking about?" Wade asked, exasperation in his voice, his actions, as he waved his hands in the air. "Who is it you've got to meet?" He smiled. "Or is it whom? I never can get that straight."

But no one laughed.

"The antisemitism has begun," Miles spoke. "In earnest."

"In what way?" Sam asked.

"The phone calls began about two months ago, becoming more vicious as time passed. Now they're really bad. Doris is frightened half out of her wits. The calls—callers—have become extremely abusive."

"Is that why you abruptly sent your kids to Colorado?" Sam asked.

"One of the reasons," Miles said gently.

"Will somebody please get back to my question?" Wade said. "Who is it you people have to meet? And why?"

The expression on Father Dubois's face was a mixture of amusement, fear, and sadness. "The devil," he said.

"THE DEVIL!" Wade jumped to his feet. "Oh, come on, gentlemen, now look here. I'll admit there is something going on in this town; I conceded that much to Miles and Sam. But the devil? No! I absolutely refuse to believe any—"

"SIT DOWN!" Dubois shouted. It was the first time Sam had ever heard the priest raise his voice. "Listen to me, Wade. Listen to me very carefully."

"I'm seventy years old, son. I've been a priest for a long, long time. This has been my parish for more than thirty-five years. I remember you as a little boy. Son, I've written volumes on the happenings in Fork County. I have your father's journals as well."

"My father's writings! I want them! I've searched everywhere—"

"Hush," Dubois commanded gently. "Listen to me. Your father knew—sensed—something evil about this area. But he spoke not a word of it—to anyone. Except, finally, to me. We talked at length until he was certain I knew what I was talking about, and he could trust me, and I him. I warned him not to go too far, to be careful in his prying. But," the old priest shrugged, "he was a good newspaper man. I wish I could have known him longer." He smiled. "Your father did not take kindly to my warnings. Oh, he believed me—your father was a good Christian man. Also a very brave man. His bravery got him killed that day."

"You know who killed my father?"

"Of course, I know who killed him."

"Well, who?"

"The devil," Dubois replied calmly, with no more emotion than if he were discussing the price of eggs.

Miles suddenly looked very uncomfortable.

Lucas and Father Haskell nodded in agreement.

Sam sat stunned.

Wade was unhappy, unconvinced, irritable, and becoming even more skeptical of Dubois. "I want my dad's journals," he said.

Dubois rose, left the room, and returned with several thick ledgers. Wade took them, holding them almost reverently. He stared at the priest. "You know—you're convinced the devil—is out there?" he waved his arm.

"Yes, son."

"You've known this for—umpteen years?"

"Yes, I have. So did your father, as you will see when you read those journals."

"Well, why didn't you do something about it? Why didn't you do something about it—before now, I mean! If you're so convinced the devil is lurking about Whitfield—do something!"

Dubois smiled. "What would you have me do, son?"

"Well—I—you—oh, crap!" Wade said, sitting down. "This is all just too fantastic for words."

"A grown man is pouting," Miles smiled.

"Miles," Wade looked at his friend, "if this . . . whatever it is is as serious as you obviously believe it is, why are you making jokes about it?"

"Because I don't know what else to do," he admitted, unhappily. "I told you the last time we spoke—I'm frightened. I don't know what to believe, except that something awful is happening here, and something even worse is about to happen. If you think you're in a bind, think about the situation I'm in! To a Jew, Satan is considered not much more than a figure of speech. No play on words, friend, but this puts me in a hell of a spot." He grinned.

"Well, I'm a reporter," Wade clung stubbornly to his profession. "I deal in facts, not superstition."

"Then I'll give you some more grist for your mill," Dubois said. "Loup-garou," he spoke the words softly.

"What?" Haskell's head jerked up. "What was that?"

"French for werewolf," Sam said. "Fellow in my outfit was

from South Louisiana—bayou country. He told me many of the old people still believe quite strongly in them."

"With good reason," Dubois said. "There are several places in the deep bayou country where Beasts have been sighted over the past couple of centuries. As civilization closes in on them, they will be seen more and more in the years to come."

"WEREWOLVES!" Wade blurted. "Oh, come on, people. Now, really!"

Sam ignored him, speaking to Dubois. "Yeti? Sasquash?"

"Quite possibly, as well as the Skunk Ape. I'm sure they are descendants of the Beasts, possibly more advanced mentally."

"WEREWOLVES?" Wade appeared stuck on the word.

"I've heard them," Dubois said. "Not often, but I've heard them. Howling, snapping, snarling—the stink of them. And I'm not alone. Your father heard them, too, Wade. They killed him, or caused him to kill himself, as the case may be. You're too young to remember the events of that night and following day, but I do, very well. The blood of the Beasts is very infectious. Those people were transformed in a matter of minutes, from human to animal, and worse. No, Wade, they're not werewolves in the classic book or movie sense, but I'm sure that's where the original idea sprang. They are the devil's servants. Believe it."

"Werewolves," Wade nodded his head. "Sure! Well, that's just wonderful! Great! First we have the devil, now we have werewolves lurking about. Where are the witches and the warlocks. Surely this scenario can't be complete without them."

"They are all present, Wade," Lucas said. "Believe it."

"But you're all men of God!" Wade cried out as if in pure anguish. "How can any of you believe this—crap?"

"Because I've seen him," Dubois said. "I've seen him, and I have beaten him—once."

Doubt in the editor's eyes. "Then beat him again," he said sarcastically.

Dubois ignored the cynicism. "I can't."

"Why?" Wade challenged him.

The priest sighed. "Because I'm too old. I'm tired. I beat him almost forty-five years ago, in Montreal. I was a young man. But I was sick for weeks afterward. Drained—very close to death." He shuddered in mental recall. "I shall never forget the smell of him. Afterward, I was too weak to even feed myself. The Sisters took care of me. I was months recovering. The Devil knows I'm too old, now. It's a game to him. He

knows I'm here, though. He's known all along. Ask Lucas, he'll tell you the same thing."

"How did you beat him?" Wade asked.

"I drove him out."

"Exorcism?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe in that!"

Dubois smiled his sad, patient smile. "Do you believe in the supernatural, Wade? In any form of it?"

"I believe there are things man cannot satisfactorily explain."

"Join the club," Miles muttered under his breath. Only Sam heard him, and he smiled.

"Nice, safe answer," Dubois said. "I can but assume you believe in God?"

"Of course, I believe in God!"

"Well, then, if you believe in God, then you must believe in the devil."

Miles sighed, a pained look on his face.

"I never said I didn't believe in the devil, Father Dubois. I just don't believe the devil is responsible for all that is happening in Whitfield."

"Then who, or what, is?"

"I don't know. But none of you has convinced me the devil is behind it, or that he's here. If he's here, gentlemen—and no offense to any of you—I want to see him."

"Son, I pray God you never get your wish," Dubois said.

"Wade," Sam said, "where, then, were all those people going last night? Hundreds of them?"

The editor shook his head, refusing to answer.

Sam turned to Lucas Monroe. "A moment ago, Lucas, Father Dubois said to ask you about something. What did he mean?"

The Methodist sighed, a faint smile on his lips. He glanced at Dubois. "There is never any escaping it, is there, Michael?"

"I told you, Lucas. Years ago."

"Yes. Well, so you did. Sam, many years ago I had a church in—well, never mind where. That would serve no useful purpose, not now. A young girl became, well—possessed. I was not convinced of her possession. It didn't take me long to become convinced, though. There is no need to go into great detail. You will all, I'm afraid, soon learn the power of that . . . creature! I sat with the girl, working with her, praying, for a long time—days. I exorcised the . . . thing from her."

"A *Methodist*?" Wade blurted.

"Shut up, Wade! Sam warned him.

The editor shut his mouth.

"I emerged from the ordeal," Lucas spoke softly, "looking like a man three times my age. My hair was snow-white; the color it is now. At the time, I was twenty-eight years old.

"Things began happening to me—and my family. Both my children were killed in separate, horrible accidents. My wife became suddenly, and to the medical profession, mysteriously ill. She lingered in great agony for months, and then died—horribly. Many unexplained things happened. Finally, I suffered a mental breakdown, knowing that everything that had happened to my family was my fault. After I was released from the sanitarium, I asked for a church far away from that city. I've been here ever since, living quietly."

Lucas smiled gently. "It's really quite a joke, isn't it, Michael? To get away from . . . him, I came to one of his strongholds. I felt his presence as soon as I arrived, but it was a feeble signal. A few months ago, it became quite intense. Then it began building, getting stronger and stronger. I knew—sensed—he would soon surface. Of course, Father Dubois and I knew of each other; there is a small circle of men who have done what we performed. Word gets around. I spoke with Michael about my feelings of alarm. He said he, too, felt it. He knew the devil was closing in, gathering his forces of evil, building another Coven. We discussed talking with you people, but we didn't know who to trust. We did agree that if you—I'm talking about you, Sam—did not come to us today, we were going to take a chance and call you. To form a battle plan, so to speak. For those of us who are left."

"If it isn't too late," Dubois added.

"What do you mean?" Wade asked, unbelieving but still fascinated by the talk from the men of God. "Too late?"

"He's called out the Beasts," Father Haskell spoke. He sat holding a cross in his hands, fingering the silver crucifix, thinking of his wife, dead five years, and wondering if he would soon join her—and in what way?

"The Beasts? Don't tell me you believe in all this mumbo jumbo, too, Glen?" Wade looked at the Episcopalian. "Next you'll be telling me you performed one of these exorcisms."

"It isn't mumbo jumbo, Wade. It's very real, and it's happening to our town. And, yes, I assisted in an exorcism shortly after I got out of school. It was not very pleasant."

Father Dubois said, "He's found the tablet that was hidden here by the trapper Duhon, and his agent is drawing power from it."

"I know the name," Wade said. "I discussed Duhon with Sam not an hour ago. But what tablet?"

"He walks among you," Sam said. *The mark of the Beast is plain. Believe in him. Once touched, forever his. The kiss of life and death.*

Dubois and Haskell crossed themselves as sudden remembrance came lurching into Sam's mind. "Now I know what happened to Tim."

"Tim?" Dubois asked.

"Tim Bennett. A young archaeologist who came to see me back in early spring. He disappeared soon after that."

"What happened to him?" Miles asked.

"I remember thinking how strange it was that Michelle walked him to his car that day. I believe she kissed him. I'm sure of it."

"She marked him," Haskell said. "Unless he joined them—or became a Beast, he's dead."

Wade stood up. "I think you people are all crazy/"

He was ignored. Feeling like a fool standing in the center of the room with no one paying any attention to him, he sat down.

Dubois said, "Duhon came here from a small village in France that had just thrown out the devil's agent, a man who had come there as a Forgeron."

"A what?" Miles looked up.

"A blacksmith."

"Black Wilder," Sam said.

"Yes, I believe that is true," Dubois agreed. "Duhon had the tablet with him. He'd been commissioned by his government to get the tablet far away from France—off the continent. He, along with Father Dubois, a distant relative of mine, brought the tablet to America. To what would eventually become Whitfield; to an area the Beasts occupied."

Father Haskell held up a hand for silence, putting a finger to his lips.

"What's wrong, Glen?" Miles whispered.

"We are not alone," the Episcopal priest said.

Sam walked to a window, glancing outside. A young man stood by the side of the rectory, just a few feet away. Sam felt Dubois by his side.

"Sonny Moore," he said. "He left the church several months

ago—quite profanely."

"There's someone in the back," Wade said. He stood in the small kitchen, looking out the window. "John Petterson. He was listening to us talk, listening through this open window." He jerked open the door. "What the hell are you doing out here?"

"Just takin' a shortcut, Thomas," the young man said, open challenge in his eyes, his speech. "No law against that—it's a free country, ain't it?"

But the challenge vanished when the bulk of Sam stepped into the door. The ex-warrior, ex-boxer turned preacher with the tattoo on his arm kept the conversation short. "Haul your ashes, boy!" he told him.

Petterson hauled his ashes.

Sam pulled Wade back into the kitchen. "Paul Smiley was standing by the west side of the house," he told him. "We had men all around the rectory, watching and listening."

"Sam?" Wade asked. "What would you have done if Petterson had stood up to you?"

"Knocked him on his butt," the preacher said.

"The ranks are narrowing," Haskell said, pointing to a tree in the front yard. "Look."

Someone had written 666 on the trunk of the tree, using white paint. Just below the numbers they had traced an upside-down cross.

"We don't have much time," Dubois said. "We've got to rally those we know we can trust."

"I know something *I* can do," Lucas muttered.

"Good Lord!" Wade blurted, staring at the men. Miles sat on the couch, eyes numb with shock and disbelief and confusion. "You're all behaving as though we can't do anything. I mean—" he let the words trail off into silence. "Miles?"

The Jew shook his head. "Don't ask me what we can do, Wade. I don't know."

Dubois put his hand on the editor's shoulder. "What can we do, son? Go to the authorities? And tell them what? That the devil is working Black Magic in Whitfield? That almost the entire town is possessed? Think about that. I can just see us now, being quietly but firmly escorted to the state mental hospital. And if we prove the notice did not run in your paper—so what? That will just delay things for a time. Besides, son, I have my doubts that any of us would be allowed to leave Whitfield." He looked at Sam. "Have you

attempted to call outside the town today?"

"No, I haven't."

"We're back to 'number, please,' again. They say the dial is not working. Won't be for some time.

"Our calls are being monitored, then?" Miles asked.

"I would think so, son," Dubois replied. He turned back to Wade. "Son, the devil is no stranger to patience; all he has to do is pull back for a time. A year, ten years, a hundred years. Time means nothing to him. A hundred years is the blinking of an eye."

"Then—what do we do?"

"Nothing, for a time. Keep quiet. We don't know who we can trust. Whitfield is a giant Coven."

"There are some we can trust?" Sam asked, a hopeful note in his voice.

"Yes," Dubois said. "A few. A pitifully few. I believe Satan has tried to touch them, and they refused him. They know him, they've met him, and they have rejected him. They don't know they have—but they have."

"And they are—?" Wade asked.

"You and your wife. Jane Ann Burke. Peter Canford. Chester and Faye. Miles and Doris. Glen," he indicated the Episcopal priest, "Lucas, Sam, Tony, Jimmy Perkins, I'm sure, and me."

"Fourteen people," Sam said, shaking his head. "Of the more than twenty-five hundred people of Whitfield, more than two thousand were active in their church. Our survey proved that."

"Most people are weak, Sam—you know that. They're followers, not leaders. Those who do not take an active part in the worshipping of Satan will remain passive, doing nothing. They will not really know what is going on around them—they will simply follow. The devil's hand has touched them, touched their hearts, their minds, blocking out all he does not wish them to see. They will go about their business, seeing nothing, until it is too late."

"And—then?" Sam questioned.

Dubois shrugged. "The Undead, probably."

"THE UNDEAD!" Wade almost shouted the words.

"They are his already," Dubois said. "They just don't realize it. They will do what the devil bids them to do."

Miles sighed audibly, shaking his head.

"I wouldn't ask you to go against your religion, Miles," Dubois said. "I wouldn't—believe me. Call whatever is

happening in this town by any name you choose. But keep your strong faith in God; that is what's protecting you and your wife."

Miles slowly nodded. "Thank you."

"Satan has us in a nice little box," Sam said. "Doesn't he?"

"Yes," Dubois smiled. "Yes, he does. But he can't nail the lid on the box as long as we're alive. He planned this very carefully, around us."

"The Undead?" Wade was stuck on the word. "You mean like in the movies?"

"Only this is reality," Lucas said.

Wade sat down beside Miles. He touched the smaller man on the knee. "Are you convinced, Miles?"

"I feel like a yoyo," he forced a smile. "Up and down. Back and forth. I'm confused, Wade. And I'm scared. I'm really scared."

Sam looked first at Dubois, then at Lucas. "I sensed a fatalistic tone in your voices a few moments ago. You two acted as though you know what's in store for you both."

"Very observant young man, Sam," the old priest smiled. A sad smile as he shook his gray head. "Sam, we're not afraid to die. Both of us are old men; we've both fought him, and in a sense, we've won. Oh, he knows we don't have the strength to fight him again. But he'll get no real pleasure out of killing us. We've given our lives to God. We're ready to go home."

Sam looked at Lucas. The Methodist nodded. "There is very little either of us can do, Sam. It's up to you young ones. You've got the strength to fight—and to beat him! Oh, you won't kill him. Don't ever delude yourselves on that. God is the only one who can kill him. But you can beat him here in Whitfield." He removed a cross from around his neck, handing it to Wade. "Put it on, son. Don't ever take it off."

Wade slipped the chain over his head, the cross gleaming dully on his chest. "Committed to the cause, I guess," he quipped.

"A most reluctant warrior," Miles grinned, his good humor never far from the surface.

Father Dubois removed his cross. With hands that trembled, from age and emotion, not from fear, he placed it around Sam's neck. "My cardinal gave this to me forty years ago. It alone won't protect you, but if you watch the reaction of those around you, it can tell you something. You're the one, Sam. You're the one who has to rally your forces and beat him."

"Why me, Michael?"

"Because you've been chosen, Sam. Don't ask me how I know, I just know."

Sam removed his own cross, handing it to Miles, startling the Jew. Miles looked at it, a strange glint in his eyes. He shrugged philosophically, then slipped it around his neck.

"Well, we Jews believe in luck, so Mazol tov."

"What's that mean?" Wade asked.

"Literally, it means Lucky Star, and I think we need all the luck we can get."

"What do we do now?" Sam looked at Dubois.

"Watch your backs," the priest replied, holding out his hands. "Let's join hands, gentlemen, and pray."

Outside the rectory, Miles stood with Sam and Wade. "I'm not fully convinced, Sam," the newspaper man said, "but I'm leaning in your direction. However, I have a suggestion for you—for all of us."

"I am open."

"We can gather up our families and run like hell! Get out of this town."

"I don't believe that would do any good," Miles said, surprising both Wade and Sam. "I agree with Father Dubois, I don't believe they would let us leave. There is this, too: even if we did get away, we'd just be running away from the problem, not solving it." He cut his eyes from man to man. "Without being obvious about it, look across the street."

The men stole quick, furtive glances about them. They were being watched from all sides. Sonny Moore, Paul Smiley, and a man none of them knew stood about them, watching them.

Petterson was still hauling his ashes.

Wade swallowed heavily. "It could be pure coincidence." But there was little conviction in his voice.

"Want to take a ride just to see if we can leave?" Miles suggested.

"No!" Sam said. "That's not for me. No one—man, Beast, or Satan is going to run me out of this county."

Wade looked hard at his minister. "Sam, that sounds like pure bravado to me."

"No," the minister replied. "No, it's a fight, that's all. I realized that while talking with Lucas and Michael."

Wade shook his head. "I don't understand, Sam." He shrugged. "But there are lots of things I don't understand."

"You two go on about your business," Sam told his friends. "Both of you act as normally as possible. I've got some things to do."

"We'll see you later on this afternoon?" Miles asked.

"Maybe." And he left them with that.

"You want to buy a WHAT?" Chester asked, astonished at the request from his minister.

"That Thompson submachine gun you told me about last

year," Sam repeated his request.

"That's what I thought you said. It's illegal, Sam. You could go to prison for just having it. So could I."

"Sure. You could also go to prison for having that Greasegun you keep at your house. Is that .45 caliber spitter a souvenir from World War Two?"

Chester smiled. "What's going on, Sam? Come on—level with me."

"Got any coffee?"

"Always. In the back. Let me lock the front door. I may as well have stayed home today; you're the first customer to walk in."

"You're being watched, Ches. You know that?"

"Across the street? Oh, that's just Emery Robinson. He's loafing, that's all. You know him—he's been one of this town's ne'er-do-wells for years."

"No, Ches," Sam corrected. "He's one of Them."

Chester turned slowly from his closing and locking of the front door. "One of—Them, Sam?"

"Let's get that coffee, Ches. I've got a lot to tell you."

It was early afternoon when Sam finished talking with his friend. He had laid it all out in the open for Chester, then given the man two crosses; one for himself, one for his wife. Before coming to the store, Sam had stopped off at the church, picking up the crosses, blessing them, praying to God for protection and sanction. He had several more in his pocket, for Jane Ann and the others.

"God in Heaven!" was all Chester could manage to say.

"Have you seen your children?"

"No. And I don't wish to see them!"

Sam almost began a lecture on forgiveness, then held his tongue, remembering his own thoughts about Michelle. It's too late for that, he concluded, not without some bitterness.

Walking back into the showroom, with all the fishing tackle, guns, knives, and camping equipment, Sam said, "I think it's important for all of us to act as normally as possible. They know we're on to them, but what they don't know is how much."

The ex-marine was recovering quickly from his initial shock, and his mind was working now on defense. "No use to run?" he looked at his minister. "Is that what you're saying?"

"That's it—for a number of reasons. Ches, try to speak to Peter sometime today; tell him what I've told you. I'll talk to

Jimmy."

The older man sighed, shuddered, and resigned himself to what Sam had said. He nodded his agreement.

"After I finish here, Ches, I want you to stock up on a few supplies. Do it quietly; a little today, a few more tomorrow, finish up Monday."

"Preacher, I was a marine in the Pacific—I went the whole route. You sound as though you want to prepare for a field operation?"

"That's exactly what I want. You have a lot of surplus C-ration here?"

"Cases of it."

"I'll take several cases. Divide the rest between the others. I want blankets, sleeping bags, a couple of pup tents. Wrap that Thompson in one of the blankets. We'll split the .45 caliber ammo. How many rounds do you have?"

"Enough to refight the battle of Saipan. Sam, you tell me to be careful, yet you're wide open in what you're doing."

"I want them to see me, friend. I want them to know I know."

"I don't understand."

"I don't expect you to, Ches. But I believe he—through Wilder—has tossed the glove down to me. I don't know why: probably never will, but he has. Dubois believes it, too. It's a game to him. But it's life and death for us."

"Then—They'll be after you?"

"Not yet. It isn't time."

"And how do you know that?"

"I feel it. I think I knew all along—now I'm certain of it. How many clips do you have for that Thompson?"

"Five. And two sixty round drums."

"Good. I want them all."

"I can only assume you've handled a Thompson before?" Chester's tone was dry as he discovered yet another side to his suddenly warlike minister.

"I carried one in Korea."

"As a guerrilla fighter?"

"Yes."

The combat vet knew there was nothing else left to ask. The two men suddenly knew each other very well.

While Chester began pulling articles from the shelves, Sam walked through the store, selecting other items, stacking them on the counter, aware he was being watched from the sidewalk. Rope, boots, a hunting knife, a small axe, ammo

pouches, canteens, tarps, web belts.

"Be sure to pick out enough clothing for all of us," Sam reminded his friend. He named those he felt he could trust. "You know their sizes?"

"I know," Chester replied quietly. "Sonny Moore is watching you."

"Let him crane his red neck. When I get tired of it, I'll chop it off."

The man is pure warrior, Chester thought. "What about Michelle? Is there no chance for her?"

"Let the devil have her!" Sam felt no remorse in saying it. "She's one of Them. I told you how she tried to mark me last night."

Chester shuddered. "How do we determine who we can trust?"

"I believe I've named them all. There might be one or two more, but don't count on it."

"Fourteen people, Sam? Fourteen!"

"Fifteen, Chester."

The store owner silently added them. "Who is the fifteenth, Sam?"

The minister looked at him over the growing mound of supplies. "God."

Sam was aware of being watched as he loaded his supplies in the back of his truck. On his last trip, Sam smiled at Chester. "Put this on my account, Ches. We'll settle up when—it's all over."

"It's on the house, Sam. Be careful. Sam? I pray you're wrong about this."

"Do you think I'm wrong?"

"No," Chester said softly. "No, I don't. I'll get my gear together."

Sam waved goodbye.

Michelle was up, sitting in the kitchen, a cup of coffee in front of her. She had bathed, washed her hair, perfumed herself. She smiled at him, but Sam knew the lip greeting was forced. If she was one of Them—and Sam had no doubts about it—living with a minister, a man of God, in a home filled with religious articles, that must be awful for a person who worships Satan.

For the first time since Korea, Sam knew the blood-boiling, mind-eating sensation of wanting to kill.

But not a human being, he thought. She is not a human

being. Not any longer. None of Them. She is a non-person, more animal than human. Rabid in thought and act. She has no soul. She has given that to Satan.

But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation.

But God was even more specific than His Son: *Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*

And that, Sam thought, is that!

He returned his wife's smile. Both of them living out an act. But for how long? Michelle's eyes were cool on him. Sam felt unclean—soiled under her gaze.

"I've been thinking, Sam. Perhaps we should try to work out our differences?"

Here it comes, Sam thought, bracing himself inwardly. Don't let her touch you, don't let her tempt you, don't let her kiss you. You've been a long time without a woman, Sam, and she is beautiful, and don't forget: she will have Satan working with her. Be careful.

Help me, Lord, he prayed.

"Yes, Michelle, I've been thinking about that, too." That, and other things.

"What—uh—do you think we should do?"

"Since I don't know the problem, I don't believe I can answer your question."

Her eyes narrowed in hate. She rose from the table. "Are you hungry?"

"Not really."

"Is something the matter, Sam?"

He smiled at her, but it was more a grimace. He watched her eyes drift to the cross hanging about his neck, outside his shirt. Black rage filled her dark eyes, the power of the hate almost filling the kitchen.

"Is that a new cross, Sam? I don't believe I've seen it before. It's—much more ornate than your old one."

"Father Dubois gave it to me."

The muscles in her jaw bunched quickly, then relaxed. That was the only sign of alarm or tension.

You're quite an actress, Michelle, he thought.

She lifted her dark, brooding eyes to his. Her eyes were evil. "When did you see him?"

"This morning."

The words of Black Wilder came to her. He had told her she had to try to convert her husband— mark him as one of Them. Failing that, Sam would have to die, but it would be

difficult to kill him.

She had questioned the devil's agent about that. With great patience, reminding her she was a longtime worshipper of the Master, and she should know these things, he explained that Sam had been chosen—by Him, and He would take great umbrage at one of His people being killed—at least this early in the game. There are rules, you must remember.

You must try to mark him, he told her.

But Michelle knew, speaking with Sam this afternoon, that he would never fall prey to her. He was too strong, too much a believer in his God.

And, though she did not like to admit it, she was afraid of Sam.

"That's interesting, Sam. What did you two discuss?"

"Church business, mostly." Not really a lie. "It was a most interesting chat, I assure you."

"How nice for you both. Well, if you're not hungry, I think perhaps I'll get ready to go."

Carry your butt, he thought bitterly. When, in the past six months, have you cared whether I was hungry or not. "Go?"

"Mrs. Carrison is in the hospital," she said, her eyes meeting his in the never-wavering gaze of the practiced liar. "In Rock Point. I'm riding over with Susan to visit her. Take her a plant for her room."

"How very considerate of you. Please give her my best." He hoped the sarcasm he felt had not slipped into his words. Then he decided he didn't care whether it had or not. "I didn't know she was ill." He decided to needle her a bit. "Do you want me to ride over with you, dear?" he smiled after his words.

Her eyes shot venom at him, but her Hps pulled back in a forced smile. "I don't believe so, Sam. But it's nice of you to ask. We're going to spend the night at Rock Point—with Susan's sister. I told you about it, you must have forgotten, Sam. I know you have a great deal on your mind," her smile broadened, "with church attendance falling so drastically." She could slip the needle just as well as her husband.

She should, she'd had hundreds of years of practice.

Touche, Sam's smile was grim. But you're a liar. You never told me a word about it. How quickly the lies come. "Well, perhaps I'd better stay here. I do have a lot of work to do on Sunday's message."

She picked up her overnight bag. Sam could smell its contents. "What is the topic for Sunday?"

"Devil worship," he lied, for he had no intention of speaking on that subject.

Michelle dropped her bag. "Darn! How clumsy of me." She bent to retrieve the bag and Sam felt an almost overwhelming urge to kick her in the behind. It was only with a great deal of effort, working hard at self-control that he did not plant his boot on her derriere.

When she turned to leave, Sam felt relief wash over him. He hoped she would not try to kiss him. She was disgusting to him. Loathsome. If she attempted to touch him, to kiss him, Sam knew he might kill her.

And the thought startled him.

He looked at the woman he had once loved so deeply.

She disgusted him!

Devil worship. Black masses. Coven.

Sam's thoughts suddenly wandered to Jane Ann. Until recently, he had always been able to cope with her feelings toward him. And, he reluctantly admitted, his feelings for her. But now . . . ?

She wasn't the first to fall for a minister. That happens often, this transference of affection, as some call it. There are courses one must take in seminary—courses that supposedly teach a minister how to cope with such a situation. Lately, though, when in the company of Jane Ann, Sam had been unable to think of a single lecture.

He forced Jane Ann from his mind as he looked away from his wife. He did not see the look of black hatred she gave him, or the spittle that oozed from one corner of her mouth. He did not see the snarl that pulled back her lips, or her curving fingers suddenly raised, hooked talons, ready to strike.

When he glanced back at her, her hands went to her hair, patting it, the fingers no longer talons. She smiled at him. "You're very distant this afternoon, Sam."

He held her gaze until her eyes slid away from his. "Sorry. I guess I have too many things on my mind."

He wished she would leave—just *get out!* Go, before he did something . . . Kill entered his mind. Strike out at her. He fought back an impulse to smash her face. Slowly, he unclenched his big fists. He did not remember balling them.

She continued her smiling at him; invitation in her eyes. He could smell the scent of musk rising from her, filling his head. He fought back her enticement until her eyes changed, a peculiar glint shining from the dark pools. Sam recognized

the look: Hate. It's been there for weeks, he thought. I just didn't see it, didn't know it.

She walked around him, getting a sweater from the hall closet. "I'd better be on my way."

"You're going to spend the night?"

"Oh, I'm sure."

"What's the number at Susan's sister's house?"

"I believe her phone is out of order, dear." Her voice was strained. "You want me to call from a service station when we get there?"

"No, that won't be necessary, Michelle. I'm sure everything will be just fine."

The look in her eyes changed from hate to confusion as her gaze bore deeply into his eyes. As if she were attempting to read his mind, and failing.

As they stood in the foyer, their eyes locking, some ugly misty force moved solidly between them. And Sam knew what it was: Evil. Another force touched them both: Good. Sam knew both Good and Evil very well, never considering himself to be especially pure—he had too much wildness in him as a youth and was still a very eai thy man. But he had always felt that God was with him, scolding him at times, but still there. He could never explain just how he knew.

As the unseen forces moved around them, Sam wondered if Michelle had ever really known God? Known His love, His compassion, His touch? If so, what had caused her to reject Him?

Or had she rejected Him? Something very uneasy touched Sam's mind as he stared at this woman who was now a stranger to him. As, Sam suddenly realized, she had always been.

As quickly as they had come, the forces vanished. Michelle's eyes glowed with power. They changed to fear as her gaze moved to briefly touch the Holy Cross hung about Sam's neck. The medallion between the jutting mounds of her breasts seemed to glow with life—with hate. The man and woman did not touch. Michelle's eyes calmed, and she turned, opening the door, stepping out on the porch. Just once more, their eyes locked.

"Have a good trip," Sam said. Personally, he thought, I hope I never see you again.

Her smile seemed inordinately evil. Her eyes once more flashing at him. She turned her back to him, closing the door without speaking.

Sam listened to her drive off. Hate, he thought. Her god says hate Christians.

Sam leaned against the foyer wall, thinking. Just about six months ago; that's when it really started building. Just about the time the digging began. Everything has always pointed to the Dig, and I didn't have enough sense to see it. But our marriage has never been right. There has always been ... something wrong. I wonder, he mused, if she has always been—one of Them?

He shuddered at the thought.

"Five years of marriage going right down the tube," he said aloud.

Everything fell into place in Sam's mind. Michelle had appeared at the army hospital one day. Just *bang*, and there she was. They had become good friends quickly. No parents, she told him. She was alone, just like Sam, and thrilled when he told her he was a minister and would be going into the active ministry.

They were married less than three months after meeting.

She knew! he thought. Somehow, she knew I was going to be picked to lead this fight. And she was chosen by her Master to stop me; to keep me occupied while They did their work around me.

It has to be.

But it's odd, he thought, I don't feel terribly depressed about a marriage going bad. About Michelle. Maybe I never really loved her? Maybe I've always known, somehow, something of far greater importance would rise; have to be dealt with.

But, he silently questioned, if I am indeed chosen, as Father Dubois seems to believe—why me?

And he felt uneasy, unworthy with the knowledge that he had been chosen.

Why did you pick me, Lord. Why me?

In the bathroom, washing his face and hands, he glanced in the mirror. His eyes had become hard; how unfeeling they seemed. He thought: if what you suspect is true—and you know it is—you're going to have to be hard. You're going to have to be ruthless in dealing with—It.

He dried his hands and face, still gazing at his reflection. There is more. Sam—say it! You're going to have to gather around you all your trusted friends—Christians—and—and destroy what is possessing this town and this part of Fork County.

What's the matter, Sam? Can't you say the word? You were a minister in Korea, and it didn't bother you to kill, did it? How many people did you kill over there? Kill, Sam. There, that's the word. Kill. Destroy.

That wasn't so difficult, was it?

But, as Chester asked, who do I trust?

Try the Lord God.

Lord, my God, he prayed, his big hands on the washbasin, fingers gripping the porcelain—stand by my side. Give me the courage to do whatever must be done. Don't forsake me, Lord—You above all know I am but a mortal man, and / am not without sin. Lord, my faith is strong, but I need Your help. Guide me, Lord. Make me as strong as needs be to seek out and destroy Your enemies.

Lord, where is the Brown girl? Was that her on that dark altar? If so, why did You show that picture to me? Why don't You intervene, Lord? I am but a mortal—You have no limitations. And the teenagers, Lord—Larry and Joan—where are they? Have they—?

The ringing of the phone broke into his silent prayer. A frightened Wade Thomas on the line.

"Sam? I'm being watched. I think they're about to do something."

"Where are you, Wade?"

"At the office." His voice was shaky.

"Miles?"

"Here. With me."

"Stay put. I'll be right down."

Sam drove the few blocks to the downtown square, parking in front of Peterson's Drug Store, next to the *Crusader* office. A group of men stood in front of Wade's newspaper office. They were in an ugly mood. Sam tucked the .45 behind his belt, pulled his shirttail over the butt of the weapon, and got out of the truck, standing for a moment looking over the situation.

For the first time in years, Sam felt the old recklessness of his youth build in him. And the feeling was good to him. His smile was tight as he walked slowly across the sidewalk, heading straight for the knot of men blocking the door.

The minister had had far more than his share of fights as a teenager and a young man—in and out of the ring. He'd been a bouncer in strip joints and clip joints; he'd worked in the oil fields as a roughneck, and he'd had many, many bloody, no-quarter barroom and back alley fights. But for all of that,

Sam had never been labeled a troublemaker; never goading anyone into a fight. He just would not back down—and he could not remember ever losing a fight.

You're a preacher, Sam, he reminded himself during his short walk from the truck to the knot of men. No longer a barroom brawler. Just remember, this is Addison's town, now, and he is one of Them.

He stopped, facing the men.

"Well, here's goody-goody," one of the men said. "I figured you'd be to home, Balon, writin' some Sunday bullshit!"

Sam looked at the speaker. David Vanderwerf. For a moment, it seemed David was going to block Sam's way, but something in the preacher's eyes drove the young man back, causing him to step aside.

"You consider God's word bullshit?" Sam asked.

The young man laughed nastily. "Just jokin', preacher."

"I didn't laugh," Sam said. He bulled his way through the men, physically shoving them aside. Startled, they made no effort to stop the minister.

Just as he placed his hand on the door, Sam heard one say, "You're gonna git yours, preacher."

Sam turned. "Which one of you wants to be the first to give it to me?" His eyes touched each man in the group. They cut their eyes from him, refusing to meet his steady gaze. A wildness swelled in Sam. He laughed at them. "All mouth and no guts," he heard himself say.

"You talk mighty big, preacher," a man said, his face flushed red from the knowledge there were five of them and only one of Sam, yet he had arrogantly, physically pushed them aside.

"Yes, I do," Sam said, a nasty grin on his lips. "And I'm big enough to back it up." He stepped toward the man, stopping a close foot from him, crowding him. "Tell you what, Moore." Sam knew the man, a local shade-tree mechanic; knew him for what he really was: a loud-mouthed bully who beat his wife, intimidated anyone he could, sneered at whatever he could not mentally comprehend—he sneered a lot—and in general was a detriment to any decent society. "Why don't we both forget I'm a minister. We'll step around back of this building. If you're as good with your fists as you say you are—which I doubt—you shouldn't have any trouble with me. What do you say about that?"

Moore looked at Sam; looked very carefully at the bulk of him, then swallowed. "I ain't never whupped no preacher

before," he managed to say.

"Don't worry about it, Moore—you're not going to 'whup' this one, either. It won't take me twenty seconds to kick your ass!"

"BREAK IT UP!" Addison's sharp words stopped the argument before it could erupt into a real donnybrook. Sam was mildly disappointed. "You men go on about your business," he spoke to the five of them. They moved on, casting surly glances at Sam. Moore looked relieved.

Addison stood between Sam and the *Crusader* door. His face was not friendly. "You're pushing your luck, Sam."

Sam smiled. "Well, tell the boys I've got The Luck with me now."

"What?"

"You should read Bret Harte, Walter. Find out about that unknown sea. Oh, something else, Walter."

"What's that, preacher?"

"You ought to take a bath. You stink!"

Sam pushed past him and walked into the newspaper office. He felt fine.

"Sam! Have you lost your mind?" Wade confronted him in the hall. "There were five of them!"

Sam calmly fished a Pall Mall out of Wade's pocket and lit it. He said, "I would have killed Moore and one other before the rest even knew what was happening. By that time, one of them would have been blinded, out of action. That would have left me only two to deal with. They would have been easy." The months of brutal training had returned swiftly to Sam. The dehumanizing, turning man into animallike killer, lethal with hands and feet. And the months of combat in Korea, behind the lines, killing silently.

Wade's face expressed his shock. "Are you serious? Kill? Blind? This is my minister speaking?"

"There is a time for everything, Wade. You should study Ecclesiastes, chapter three, verses one through eight."

A smile spread Miles's lips.

"I'll be in church tomorrow, Sam. Preach to me then."

"I'll do my best." Sam led them into Wade's office, then told him what he had done at Chester's, advising them to do the same. He looked first at Wade. "Your pickup in good working order?"

"Just had it serviced."

Sam glanced at Miles. "Sure, Sam. But I haven't fired a gun

in years. I'm a fisherman, not a hunter."

"When you go to Chester's, tell him that. He'll fix you up with a shotgun. Get several cases of shells, both shot and slugs. Nothing like a slug-loaded shotgun to stop a man; doesn't leave any doubt."

"Okay, Sam, whatever you say. But listen to me for a minute. Doris is sitting right on the ragged edge. I haven't told her very much, but I think it's time we did. We lost people in Europe, Sam, on both sides of the family—in the . . . camps. Close relatives. Doris is just now getting over that, and that's fourteen-fifteen years ago. I don't know how she's going to take this news."

"You want me to talk to her?"

"Yes, please. If you will."

"Tell you what, you go pick up Faye and Jane Ann. Take them over to your house, let them prepare Doris for what I have to say. Wade, you get Anita. I'll meet you at Miles's in an hour. We'll talk, then."

Sam rose, stretching, the front of his shirt sliding up, exposing the butt of the .45. Miles and Wade looked at the gun, at each other, then at Sam.

"Have you ever used that thing, Sam?" Wade asked.

"Yes. Many times. I carried it in Korea. You men go on, now, I've got to see Father Dubois. Something about Lucas worries me."

Sam drove by Lucas's home. No one there. He was being followed, but the tail did not worry him. Let them watch all they wanted to. He tried the church study. Locked. He drove to the rectory.

"Where is Lucas, Michael?"

The old priest invited Sam in, shaking his head. "Against my advice, Sam, he's gone to do battle."

A chill touched Sam. "Not—out there?" he jerked his head in the direction of Tyson's Lake.

Dubois nodded. "He said he had nothing to lose. He's almost a dead man, Sam."

"What chance does he have? Out there, I mean?"

"None," the priest said flatly. "That's why They let him go." He looked hard at Sam, sensing something in the man. "Don't be a fool, Sam! I don't think They would try to stop you, but don't go after him. You're needed here."

"I'll be careful, Michael. But I want to see them. I must satisfy my curiosity. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes," Dubois said softly. "Yes, I'm afraid I do."

"You've seen the Beasts?"

"You'll smell them a long time before you see them." There was an edge to his voice.

"Can they be killed?"

"Oh, yes. Nothing so dramatic as a stake through the heart. They're part animal—part human; overall, most disgusting. They are, I believe—although my philosophy goes directly against church doctrine—a mistake."

The ringing of the phone prevented Sam from asking what Dubois meant by "a mistake."

"I must go," the priest said, hanging up the phone. "There's been a death."

"Who?"

"Mrs. Norman. Neighbors found her in her backyard a few minutes ago. Heart attack, they believe."

"I didn't know she had heart trouble."

"She didn't. It's begun, Sam. He's beginning to make his move. Only just begun."

"Father Dubois? Are you expecting a crowd at mass tomorrow?"

"Only the old, son. You'll see at your services. We've lost the others."

He was gone before Sam could ask anything else.

Only just begun.

"Tell me it's not true!" Doris Lansky confronted Sam before he could get in the front door. "You're all playing a joke on me."

Sam led her to a chair. "Sit down, Doris. No, it's not a joke." He took her hands in his. "Brace yourself, you're not going to like what I have to say."

A few moments later, Mrs. Lansky began to weep.

"Balon's on to us," Walter Addison told Wilder over the phone. "He's been a busy man today."

"Regrettable," Wilder said. "But not an insurmountable problem. We'll just have to be more careful; it's too soon for us to make any major move. We need a few more days. The roads have to be legitimately closed."

"Suppose Balon and the others try to leave?"

"They won't. Balon is going to fight me." He laughed. "I know the type of man he is. I should, I've met him many

times, and I'll beat him."

"Let me kill him!"

"No. Fool! You don't understand. This is not between you and Balon. This is between God and our Master." Again, he laughed. "It's an old war, Walter, one I have fought many, many times. You simply do not understand the rules."

"Rules?"

"God is using Balon as His warrior here on earth. He always picks one like Balon. I should know," his voice was bitter. "No, Walter, you couldn't kill Balon even if you tried. Neither can I—not yet." The nasty laugh rang through the phone. "But I'll test his courage tonight. I'll see if Balon is to be a worthy foe."

"What do you mean?"

"He's coming to see me tonight."

"How do you know that?"

The laughter. "I know everything, Addison. I know what is in the hearts of all men and women. I know their weaknesses and their strong points. Don't, under any circumstances, try to stop Balon tonight. He'll kill you, or anyone who tries to stop him. I'll play his game this evening, then put him to the test at a later date."

"I don't understand."

"You're not supposed to." The line went silent.

Addison slowly replaced the receiver, then stood by his desk for a few moments, mulling over what Wilder had said. There had been no fear in Wilder's voice as he spoke of Balon, but there had been respect. Addison decided he would leave Balon alone.

The office was filthy, stinking of urine and defecation. The musky odor of sex hung heavy in the room.

In the rear of the building, in the cell area, a prisoner—a transient—lay dead and rotting on a cell floor. The prisoner had been tortured, beaten, starved, and sexually assaulted. The man had been dead for days. Rats, their eyes beady and evil, roamed close to the bite-pocked body.

The sheriff's secretary entered the office. She glanced at Addison, hiked up her skirt, and bent over a desk. Walter sodomized her as a deputy looked on, his eyes dead. When Addison finished, the deputy took his turn.

In another part of town, a mother caressed her teenage son while the father made violent incestuous love with his teenage daughter.

A middle-aged man beat his bed-ridden mother to death

with a club while his wife looked on, urging him to strike the woman harder, laughing as the blood splattered the walls of the bedroom.

Brothers and sisters fornicated to the amusement of their parents, and then changed partners.

A teenage boy pushed his younger brother off the roof of the garage where they had been playing, smiling as the boy screamed on his way down. A short scream. The screaming ceased abruptly as the boy hit the concrete parking area. The teenager climbed down, dragged the broken body into a tool shed, and stuffed the battered carcass into a burlap bag.

"Willie!" his mother squalled from the house. "Come on in, now, you've chores to do. What was that noise a minute ago?"

The boy picked up a claw hammer from his father's workbench and walked to the house. His smile was evil, eyes shining banefully. His smile turned to laughter when he saw his mother bending over the sink. She looked around just in time to see, very briefly, the hammer swinging. Her skull popped like an overripe melon and she slid in a sprawl to the kitchen floor, legs jerking as she died.

Willie walked into the living room, where his father sat listening to a ball game on the radio. The teenager buried the hammer head in his father's skull.

"It's a home run!" the announcer shouted.

"Screw you!" Willie said, turning off the radio. "I hate baseball."

Willie walked back into the kitchen, stepping nonchalantly over his mother's cooling body. He fixed a sandwich and sat down at the table, chewing slowly. The kitchen smelled of fried liver. His mother should not have fixed liver. Willie had told her time after time he did not like liver.

His mother's dead eyes stared at her son as he ate his sandwich. The eyes seemed fixed on the medallion hanging about his neck.

Willie wondered if the earth Master, Dr. Wilder, would be angry with him for doing this. He decided he would not.

He stood up, gazing out the window at the little girl playing in the meadow behind the house. He felt an erection build, his breathing quickening. He slipped quietly out of the house, walking toward the young girl in the meadow, playing gently among the summer flowers.

After a time, the prairie winds blew her dress across the meadow, a splash of color amid the flowers.

Otto's wild laughter rang through the house as he swung the leather belt. His wife's screaming as the belt struck bare flesh drove him on. The medallion caught the late afternoon sun streaming through the window, casting golden flashes around the bedroom.

Stockman dropped to his knees beside the woman. "Now you'll accept him?" he questioned.

"No!" the woman sobbed. "NO!"

"Oh, yes," Otto smiled, caressing her bruised flesh. "Yes, you will." He brutally mounted her, enjoying her screaming.

At dusk, Herman Alario, horse trainer at Little River ranch, watched the foreman through curious and suspicious eyes. Where was Slim? he mused. Why hadn't the sheriff been notified of his disappearance? Something was sure as hell funny around this place, and Herman knew damn well Slim didn't just take off. Something bad had happened to him.

The actions of the men puzzled Herman as well. And the boss, Ray Zagone—he was acting strange. Herman retreated further into the darkness of the north side of the barn, squatting down, thinking, his back to the barn.

For all his supposed drinking and fighting—and that was exaggerated—Herman was, at heart, a believer in God, although he seldom went to church more than twice a year. He had been raised in the church by strict parents, in Arizona, and Herman didn't like all the talk he'd been hearing in the bunkhouse. Talk he was not supposed to hear. Talk of black masses and devil worship and orgies of the most disgusting kind. Men with men, women with women, and something about kissing the red ass of the devil.

Sickening!

"Where's Alario?" he heard the foreman, Lou Parker ask.

"Don't know," a cowboy said. "He was around here a half hour ago."

"Is he still wearing that damned cross around his neck?"

"Yeah."

"Then we can't waste any more time on him. If he doesn't come around to us tonight, we'll have to dispose of him. He should have come around by now."

DISPOSE OF HIM! Herman almost panicked. Him is me! Jesus God—they're talking about *me*!

He remained rock-still by the side of the barn, only his eyes moving in the darkness, shifting from side to side, searching the night for any person who might be coming to harm him. And he knew, now, that every man and woman on this ranch

was against him. What he couldn't figure out was: Why?

The high, shrill laughter of a woman reached him in the night. Pat Zagone. "More, more!" she screamed. "Right there!" she grunted.

A guttural moaning drifted to Herman. The gruntings of men and women together.

Dear God, the cowboy thought. What is happening around here?

He remembered what Slim had told him. That something was out of kilter on the L-R, and they both had talked of pulling out. Slim had said, "There's a . . . force . . . or something that ain't right around here. You been seein' all them medallions on folks? And everybody cuts out on Friday nights. All the whisperin,' too. I don't like it, Herman. It's—I don't know—evil, I think. I don't know."

And then Slim disappeared.

Herman watched two cowboys, Pip and Mack, meet on the lighted front porch of the ranch house, talk for a moment, then split up.

Here they come, Herman thought. He waited. There was no place to run.

Five minutes passed in silence. Herman longed for a chew of tobacco, but was afraid to move, afraid to reach for the pouch in his back pocket. He heard movement to his right. "Pip?"

"Yeah?"

"He's gotta be around here—close to the barn. Maybe in it."

"Right. Don't let him git to his truck."

"Won't do him no good. I jerked all the wires."

Damn!

"You be careful. He's cat-quick in a fight."

Herman heard the sound of a round being chambered into a rifle. A lever action. Probably a .30-30, he thought. His own rifle was on a rack in his pickup; his pistol in a trunk in the bunkhouse. But he had a sheath knife on his belt.

Don't pull it yet, he cautioned. Light could reflect off the blade and give me away.

Why are they hunting me? his mind worked feverishly. Why do I sense something evil all around me?

Pat's high shrilling reached Herman. Pat's daughter, Jean, joined in the laughter. Obscenity spewed from her young mouth, the oaths floating through the soft air of early night on the prairie. She called out the foreman's name, over and over.

Herman slowly shook his head in disgust. Ray and Pat were watching the foreman screw their daughter. Sick, sick!

Herman crossed himself without thinking.

"Something moved on the north side!" Pip called.

Herman reached for his knife. Too late. The men were on him, pinning him to the ground. A boot caught him on the side of the head, stunning him. He drifted into unconsciousness.

When he came out of his daze, Herman was on the now darkened porch of the ranch house, his hands tied behind his back. He was naked from the waist down.

Pat crouched between his legs. She was naked, her woman's breasts swinging free, the nipples enlarged. She smiled at him, the smile seeming cruel and evil—yet enticing to the cowboy. A medallion hung between her breasts, the gold gleaming at him. The woman touched his bare belly, the hand slipping down to grasp his manhood.

"Nice," she muttered, stroking him. "Very nice." She bent her head to kiss his cheek, her tongue licking him like a cat. "Don't be afraid, Herman," her words were soothing. "There is nothing to be afraid of. Nothing at all. Just let us pleasure you. We've waited so long."

Herman nodded, thinking, I'll play their game until I get a chance to run, then I'll cut out.

With that, he doomed himself forever.

Pat's daughter, Jean, joined the group on the porch. The fifteen-year-old was naked. Herman, despite his earlier feelings of disgust, felt himself thicken at the sight of the teenager. Pat's hand increased her stroking of his maleness.

The mother licked Herman's ear, whispering, "Look at her, Herman. Isn't she lovely, beautiful?" The mother reached out and up to fondle her daughter's pudendum. The girl moaned, kneeling beside her mother and the prostrate cowboy. The girl kissed him on the mouth, wetting his lips with her tongue.

"Isn't that nice, Herman?" Pat asked him, her breath hot on his face. "Aren't her lips soft?"

The woman and the girl touched the cowboy, stroking him, caressing him. Herman groaned, his penis hot and hard in the woman's soft hand.

"I'm going to have Pip untie you, Herman," Pat said, as Jean swung one leg over his waist, her slim hand guiding him into her wet softness. Herman's hands, free, drifted about the girl's waist, gripping young bare flesh as she settled into a

moaning, sweaty rhythm, moving on his hardness, working him deeper.

As Pat's lips touched his mouth, Herman felt something leave him. The mother's mouth on his, the daughter's silkiness trapping him, Herman listened as the departing thing left his body and mind, winging away. As lips worked on his, a darkness overtook him, and the evil that is in all humankind rose to the surface, driving out the goodness that is in all humankind, but not buried so deeply as the evil.

Herman screamed in the darkness as an almost unbearable wave of pleasure/pain gripped him. Soon, the pain was gone, leaving only pleasure.

"One more," he heard the woman say. "We have one more for you, Master."

And Herman began laughing, his voice sounding savage pushing past his lips.

The girl jammed him full inside her, yelling her pleasure to the ever-moving winds of Fork County, the cry blending with the night.

TWELVE

Sam parked several blocks from Glower's Funeral Home and walked the remaining distance to the buildings, on the outskirts of town. His followers of that afternoon were gone, as if they had been deliberately pulled away from watching him. He walked toward the building, the weight of the .45 a comfort against his belly.

The business was dark as he slipped around the building, all his senses working, alert for any human sound. Cautiously, his hand found the door knob in the rear of the establishment. Unlocked. He slipped into the dimly lit funeral home, quietly shutting the door behind him. The sweet odor of death hit him as he walked the dark length of the hall, checking each small room. There was no one in the building; at least, no one alive, that is.

Sam found the room containing the body of John Benton, the chief of police resting in a satin-lined coffin. Sam took a small pocket knife, opened the blade, and, lifting Benton's right hand, made a small cut on the wrist. Blood leaked from the wrist.

Intent upon his work, Sam did not see Benton's eyelids flutter.

"Not embalmed," Sam muttered, placing the hand inside the casket.

Sam slipped from room to room in the funeral home, until he was satisfied that no one had been embalmed in this place of business for a long time. There was not one drop of zinc chloride, arsenic, or mercuric chloride to be found. The workroom equipment was stiff from disuse.

"The Undead," Sam murmured, walking down the darkened hall, letting himself out the back door.

Had he but looked around, he would have seen John Benton staring at him from the office window, eyes wild and red, tongue thick and dark, teeth grown into fangs.

Nine o'clock when Sam reached the area known as Tyson's Lake. It was far out in the Bad Lands, and Sam felt completely alone.

No, he corrected his thinking. I'm not alone. I have God.

Sam had changed into dark twill trousers, a long sleeve shirt, sturdy lace-up Jump Boots from his days in the army, and he had slipped on leather gloves. The .45 was hooked onto a web belt, extra clips in pouches. A big-bladed Bowie knife hung in its leather sheath on his left side.

He had bounced along gravel roads, then dirt roads before reaching his destination. He had, of course, heard of the lake, from Wade and others, but had never been out here. People he had asked to take him had been most reluctant to oblige.

Well, Sam thought, getting out of the truck, let's do it, Balon.

He glanced up at the sky. Clouds covered the moon and stars. An aura of foreboding hung over the land.

Sam stood for a moment by the side of the road. Get yourself under control, he cautioned. Push your anger aside; push Michelle out of your mind; forget the sight of John Benton. Get all your senses working properly.

Jane Ann slid gracefully into his thoughts. Jane Ann of the soft hands and gentle eyes.

"Go on home, Janey," he muttered. "You don't want to be out here. Not on this night."

He jacked a round in the .45, then eased the hammer down, replacing the big automatic in the military flap-type holster. Ignoring the many No Trespassing—Danger—Keep Out signs, Sam climbed the high fence, dropping to the other side. A small scrap of material was securely caught in the fence. Sam pulled it free, fingering the cloth. Denim, he thought.

"Sheriff, she was wearing a western shirt, tennis shoes, and jeans," Joan's mother had told Addison that day as Sam stood listening. "Brand new jeans, too. I just got them from J C Penney that day. Come in the mail."

This is new denim, Sam thought. He put the piece of cloth in his pocket, then walked on through the darkness.

At the bottom of the hill, Sam paused, looking around, getting his bearings. A small stand of timber by a small lake, the water gleaming dully in the night, matching the dull shine of the cross around Sam's neck. The timber was foreboding-looking. He looked to the east, toward the Dig site, a few miles away. Not one light shone in the darkness.

"Must be early sleepers," he said, knowing they were not asleep—sensing it. He sensed something else, too: Evil.

The man's gaze swept all directions. Not one light shone. No birds sang. The wind sighed for a moment, then was still,

as if God's breath were warning the minister with the .45 strapped around his waist.

Sam walked toward the lake, then stopped for another look. He had driven around the area, looking for Lucas's car, then gave up the search. These were Bad Lands, and Lucas had lived here for many years; he would know dozens of hiding places.

Sam touched the flashlight in his back pocket, then moved forward. At the edge of the water, he paused. Standing very still, Sam looked around, all senses working overtime. A fish jumped into the lake, hitting the water with a smacking sound. To his right, in the dark timber, something stepped on a branch, breaking it. A snarl followed.

Sam spun around, in a crouch, right hand on the butt of the .45. His heart picked up in tempo, thudding in his chest. Another growl, an answering growl to the first. This one came from Sam's left, in that part of the timber that gently curved around the small body of water. Whatever was in the timber—man or Beast—there were two of them, at least. The knowledge was not at all comforting to Sam.

Sam stood with his back to the lake, the body of water no more than five or six acres at most. The wind suddenly picked up, blowing from east to west, bringing with it a faint chant.

A chant! Out here? No one lived within miles of this place. Of course! Sam remembered the caravan he had seen; they worship at the Dig site. Again, the chanting drifted to him, faint, but unmistakable. He could not make out the words, but for some reason, they sounded like a warning. But for whom? Or what?

Abruptly as it had begun, the chanting ceased, leaving the night with an eerie silence.

More than that, Sam thought. Not just silence, but evil. I can feel it; sense it all around me, like a foul-smelling assassin draped in a dark cloak.

Sam looked toward the timber. He knew—and the knowledge was not easy to take—he would have to enter that stand of timber. It went against his training. A wise man does not fight the enemy on his own ground, unless you have the element of surprise with you, and he did not have that. They were waiting for him.

The wind shifted, bringing with it a horrible stench. A smell unlike anything Sam had ever smelled. His nose wrinkled in disgust.

Sam took a step forward, the light off the lake reflecting from the cross around his neck. The growling in the timber intensified, the—whatever they were—seemed to sense the power of the cross. And resent it.

Sam felt the things moving closer to the timber line. He could feel their anger, their frustration, their hatred. It was as if they knew, somehow, that Sam Balon had come to harm them.

From the timber came a horrible snarling, a growling, a snap of heavy jaws, followed by a puff of putrid air, assailing Sam's nostrils. For the first time in many years, Sam felt a tinge of fear in his belly.

He moved closer to the timber. "Lucas!" he called. "Are you in there?"

The things roared at him, a non-human howling of rage and hate.

Sam felt them watching him. He could dimly make out their shapes in the timber. Huge shapes; misshapen in all their bulk. He could smell the unGodly stench of them.

He heard a human moan. A cry of pain.

Lucas? It had to be.

Whoever it was suddenly screamed in pain. "Oh, my God, help me, help me!" It was Lucas. "Lord, my God, give me strength to—" His words cut off abruptly in a choking cry of pain.

Sam knew he could wait no longer. Lucas needed help. Now!

He ran toward the timber, ignoring the snarling and the growling. He raced toward another human being in desperate need, knowing he was running into the unknown. The smell became heavier, more powerful, almost unbearable. Branches whipped at Sam's face, the heavy cross bounced on his chest. A powerful roar stopped him. The smell was sickening. The Beast—and it had to be that—was very close to him.

"No, Sam!" Lucas shouted. "Run! Oh, my God-SAM, GET OUT!"

The voice was pain-filled, in terrible agony. Sam moved toward the sound, edging his way through the darkness of the timber, his flesh crawling with the uncertainty of what lay ahead of him. He didn't dare use his flashlight; the Beasts would be sure to spot him then.

The stench was making him sick.

Suddenly, something warned Sam; some inner sense for survival he had developed in combat told him to duck—shift

direction, hit the ground! Or perhaps, he would later think, it was God warning him. Sam hit the ground, throwing himself to the right, rolling, coming up with his back to a huge tree, on his knees.

A huge clawed hand tore through the air, swiping. Powerful jaws, dripping saliva, snapped at nothing. The fangs, thick, yellow, four to five inches long, gleamed in the dimness of the forest gloom. The Beast, well over six feet tall, stood a few yards from Sam, roaring at him, its stinking breath fouling the air.

For a few heart-pounding seconds, Sam squatted with his back to the tree in total shock. *Nothing* he had ever seen or done or read could have prepared him for this. The Beast glared down at him, hate shining blood-red in its small evil eyes.

The Beast was huge, tall, perhaps two hundred and fifty to three hundred pounds, very wide across its trunk. It had massive jaws that slowly narrowed almost into a pinhead at the top. Its body was covered with thick coarse hair, matted with filth. And the face. God! the face. It was the face of all that was evil. It was insane human; cunning animal; crazed night prowler. It was a walking nightmare.

And Sam was in the middle of the waking incubus.

Sam touched the cross on his chest, grasping it, holding it up to the Beast. The grotesque, subhuman howled with fear, jerking its hairy arms up to shield its eyes from the Holy Cross. Its roaring rattled the leaves of the forest. The Beast's hate and anger finally overcame its fear, and it moved toward Sam, huge bare feet shuffling through the undergrowth.

Sam clawed the .45 from the holster, jacked back the hammer, and shot the creature twice in the chest, the heavy slugs slamming the creature back, blowing holes the size of quarters. It shook itself, screaming in pain, then charged. Sam leveled the automatic and squeezed the trigger twice, shooting the Beast in the face, the slugs going into its open mouth, clipping off a fang, then traveling up into its tiny brain, blowing out the back of its head. The Beast flipped off its feet and fell backward, slumping against a thick tree trunk. It quivered, its bowels relaxing, then was dead.

Sam's chest was heaving as he got to his feet, standing over the dead Beast. He was almost numb with shock. He had never seen anything like this.

Suddenly, he remembered there were two of them, at least.

Surely the other Beast would come to avenge the death of its friend or mate. Sam ejected the half empty clip, put it in a pouch, and pushed in a full clip, jacking in round, leaving the weapon on full cock. He waited.

Some . . . thing was stumbling toward him, through the dark timber, its breathing harsh. Whatever it was, it moved closer.

Sam lifted the .45, steadying the butt with the palm of his left hand, finger on the trigger. Sweat ran into his eyes. His finger tightened, taking up slack on the trigger as the thing moved nearer. Sam almost screamed as the bushes parted and the creature stepped out into the small clearing.

Lucas Monroe.

Sam lowered the .45, easing the hammer down with his thumb. "Lucas! My Lord, Lucas—what happened to—" His words stuck in his throat as clouds moved past the moon, giving light to the scene on the ground. The Godly, the dead Godless, and the bloody old man.

Lucas's left arm was ripped and blood-stained. His face and bare chest were claw-marked, dark and shiny-black in the moonlight.

"Oh, Sam, Sam—I tried to stop them." His words were strangely harsh. "Foolish of me, I know. I'm too old; don't have the strength. Sam, there's too many of them. You young fool! Get away, get out!"

Sam stepped toward the Methodist minister. "Come on, Lucas. We've got to get you to a doctor."

"NO!" he backed away from Sam, shaking his bloody head. "Too late, Sam. It's too late. For me, maybe not for you. Don't touch me." His words were painful to hear. "Kill me, Sam. For the love of God—kill me. Use your weapon. That's all I ask."

Sam took another step toward him. Lucas held up his hand, and Sam heeded the warning. "Stay away, Sam. I'm warning you, son—don't you understand? You've got to kill me before I—become one of —Them!" he cut his eyes to the dead stinking Beast.

Sam heard movement behind him; a quiet rustling of the leaves. The second Beast was stalking him through the timber. With the pistol hanging by his side, Sam gently eased the hammer back to full cock.

"Tell me about the Beasts, Lucas."

"Sam, I—don't have much time. It's—working in me right now. Son, I don't have much longer in this form. Please, when the time comes, give me the dignity of dying a whole

man—a human being. Give me that much."

The Beast moved closer to Sam, slipping stealthily behind him. The stench grew stronger. Sam wondered if Lucas knew the Beast was stalking him? If the minister—what was left of him—was stalling? He decided not.

"I've got to know about them, Lucas."

"Have Wade show you Duhon's journal, Sam. It's among those he got from Father Dubois. That will tell you all you need to know. For the love of God, Sam, you're a merciful man—kill me!"

The Beast behind Sam stopped moving. "They've bitten you, Lucas. They're rabid? Is that it?"

Lucas shook his head. His face seemed swollen, seeming to change with each second.

The Beast behind Sam took a cautious step, then was silent in the timber. Waiting to pounce.

"No, Sam. Not in the way an ordinary animal is rabid. These are the Beasts mentioned on the tablet." He moaned, almost a snarl.

Sam had to know more, although he hated to put Lucas through this. "I don't understand, Lucas—but I'm trying. How did the Beasts get here?"

"Sam, they've *always* been here. I believe they've been here since God expelled Lucifer from Heaven. I *know* they've been here since the first Sixth Day."

"The **FIRST** Sixth Day!" the words exploded from Sam's mouth.

"Listen to me, Sam. Listen to me very carefully. I've only time to say this once, then for the love of God, you've got to kill me—for your own safety.

"I can't really explain them; I don't believe any mortal can. They are part human; part animal— all evil. I heard you calling out for me; it enraged them. They have to be killed. Wiped from the face of this earth! Oh, Sam, nobody knows how many times God tried to make man in His own image—or woman. We don't even know what His image is! The Beasts breed, with anything, Sam—anything! keeping their species alive. Sometimes, Duhon found out, as did Dubois, they capture humans and breed with them. But they can sleep for years, Sam, with only a chosen Sentry awake on guard. They can do that because they answer to Satan. I don't have to explain *that* to you!

"They're God's failures, son. The devil took them, made them his own. Don't ask me how—I can't answer that. I'm just

a man. Or was." He snarled, the sound coming from his mouth chilling Sam.

"I don't have much time, son. Sam, the Bible doesn't make reference to God's mistakes— naturally. Who was around to record them? Confirm them?" Lucas began to slobber, his jaws growing thicker, the saliva, a stinking drool, began dripping from his mouth and thickening lips. The transformation of this gentle man was horrible to witness.

"They're cunning, Sam. They survived the Flood and everything else God did in His attempt to destroy the evil on this earth. He failed there, too. I don't know why, or how, but He did. You know God rules the Heavens and Satan rules the Earth." He growled. "The Beasts belong to Satan—they answer only to him." Lucas screamed; a roar, the slobber spraying from his lips.

"Only a moment more, Sam, then you have to do it. I'll be brief. No! Don't come any closer." His voice had deepened, the words slurring, hard to understand. "Be very careful, for there are many more towns like Whitfield around the nation, around the world. The Beasts can lie dormant for hundreds of years. Yeti? Sasquash? I agree with Michael—yes. Probably, but of a higher intellect than these foul things." He snarled, his face changing into a horror of man/beast. "I'm all out of time, Sam. God . . . bless . . . you."

The Beast behind Sam charged, just as Lucas roared, the once-human moving toward Sam, his mouth open, fanged teeth snapping. Sam shot what was once Lucas. Shot him in the chest, then between the eyes. He spun, dropped to one knee, leveled the .45, and shot the charging Beast coming up behind him, emptying the .45 into the creature. The Beast was slammed backward. It stumbled, fell, and began its death quiver, dying at Sam's feet.

In the midst of all the carnage, the stink, with the knowledge that all he had heard and seen this day and night was true; knowing he had killed his friend, a man of God, and wondering why He had not protected Lucas, Sam's mind could take no more. Automatically, survival taking over, Sam could not remember changing clips in the .45. He looked at Lucas. All trace of the man who was was gone. The minister was a Beast. A small silver cross lay on the matted hair of its chest.

Sam sank to his knees and wept.

He wept until his chest ached from exhaustion. The clouds that had kept the night dark blew away, and the moon shone

with all its brilliance. When Sam opened his eyes, red-rimmed, and wiped them free of the last tear, he looked at the shining image of the cross on the ground, just to his left. The moon, hitting the branches of a tall tree, formed a cross on the cool earth of the forest. A shining silver-white rood on God's earth.

Sam did not see the Beasts watching him from the cover of the timber. Wanting to attack, but fearful of the light of the moon and the power of the cross their Master hated, and had warned them of.

Sam rose to his feet, the .45 in his hand. He put the big automatic in leather, then drew his knife. Careful not to let any blood from the Beasts touch his skin, Sam hacked the heads from the Beasts with his Bowie. Using his shirt, he fashioned a crude bag for the dripping heads. He left Lucas—or what was once Lucas—lying on the ground.

Looking at what was left of Lucas, Sam said, "God, this was a good man. A true and loyal servant of Yours. He deserved much better than this. Take him—take him home."

Sam walked out of the timber boldly, unhurriedly, carrying the bag of stinking heads. He walked past the small lake, up the hill. At the crest, he stood alone, in the moonlight. He was not afraid. His chest bare, flecked with mud, his clothing stained with blood.

He stood with powerful legs spread, fists clenched. He looked down into the blackness of the timber. "All right, Prince of Darkness, Lord of Flies, Ruler of the Night, hear me well. I have my God, and a few people I know are good, and who, for whatever reason, have resisted you and your Coven.

"I'm but a mortal man, and I know I can't destroy you, but I'm going to beat you this time around. You want a fight?" He held up the bloody bag of heads. "Come on—here I am."

Lightning danced across the sky. A phenomenon seen that night by only Balon and Wilder. The devil's agent stood outside his trailer at the Dig, watching his Master play with the minister.

Sam laughed at the lightning. "Is that the best you can do, Master of Filth?" He knew he was deliberately antagonizing the devil. He didn't care.

The lightning danced closer.

Sam laughed on the hill. "No, Ruler of Evil. My God won't let you kill me—not yet. First you must meet me face to face. I want to look at you."

A savage burst of lightning seared a tall tree nearby. Sam

could see the explosive heat from the blast.

"Yes, yes," he said. He had not flinched when the tree exploded, the sap igniting. "I know your power, Captain of Rats, but you don't frighten me—not any longer. Now you listen to me, a good man went down tonight, by your hand, then by mine. And you'll pay for that—believe it!"

A violent crack of thunder momentarily deafened the minister. "Yeah, yeah, Drinker of Pus, you'll probably kill me in time. I realize that." Sam could not hear his own words through the rolling, crashing, seemingly endless cascade of thunder. The lightning came in flickering bolts, dancing as a snake's tongue through the sky. "But it won't be tonight, you evil bastard!"

The sky hissed as Sam removed the cross from around his neck, holding the silver to the sky, arm extended upward. The lightning abruptly ceased, thunder now silent as a gentle rain fell on the fenced-in area known as Tyson's Lake. The rain fell there, and nowhere else in Fork. The moisture picked up in intensity, falling in glistening sheets, the color of the torrent matching the shining of the cross.

"God's way of cleansing the earth," Sam said, slipping the chain over his head, the cross resting on his bare chest. His hearing slowly returned. He looked down into the darkness of the timber. "We'll meet again," he said. "Me or mine," he added, not knowing why he said that.

Sam walked through the rain to the fence, climbed it, and went swiftly to his truck, the bloody bag of heads swinging by his side. He was driving toward Whitfield, under the blanket of billions of stars, when the other Beasts emerged from their cover in the timber. They growled at the downpouring of water, disliking it, for their way was of filth, and they knew the moisture came from a God they were aligned against.

Snarling and snapping, they dragged Lucas and their headless comrades into the holes in the earth, into their caves, pulling the carcasses far below the surface of Fork County, hundreds of feet below the timber, past the ever-present Sentry watching from his post.

There, they ate the dead, stripping the flesh, breaking and sucking the bones. Nothing would be wasted in their feast. Now, Lucas Monroe no longer existed except in the minds of his friends.

Later, when one of the Beasts squatted to defecate, a small silver cross would lodge in his rectum, causing the Beast

some small discomfort before he could pick it free. The Beast tossed the cross into the darkness of the cave, bouncing it off a wall. It glistened briefly, then the light faded and died.

THIRTEEN

Sam drove to the rectory, pulling around to the rear of the building. He banged on the door. Father Dubois answered the pounding, looking at Sam without speaking; at the minister's bare chest, a pistol belted around his waist, his stained trousers, and the sack in his hand, dripping stinking crimson. The old priest nodded his understanding.

"Come in, Sam. I'll find you a shirt. It might be a bit snug, but it will cover you. Father Haskell's here with me. We've been waiting for your return."

In the priest's small living room, Sam spoke to the Episcopalian, then slipped into the shirt Dubois handed him. He was unable to button it over his massive chest, but was grateful for the warmth.

"Could I have a small glass of wine, Michael?"

The priest smiled. "How about a couple ounces of bourbon, Sam?"

Sam returned the slight smile. "Better. Thanks."

He knocked back the bourbon in two gulps, chasing the fire with a glass of water. The glow of the whiskey spread through him, warming him, calming him.

Haskell's nose wrinkled in disgust at the smell coming from the makeshift bag. "What's in the sack?" he asked, his face pale.

"Heads of the Beasts," Sam opened the bag, the heads rolling out, exposing the stench, the red staring eyes, the opened fanged mouths. Their awfulness drew gasps from Dubois and Haskell. The Episcopalian was suddenly, violently ill. He ran to the bathroom, the sounds of his vomiting drifting to the living room.

Haskell walked back into the room. "I—I'm sorry. I was not prepared for—that!" he pointed to the heads on the floor, shuddering as he looked at them.

"Don't touch them without some protection on your hands," Sam said. "They are highly infectious." He sat down, weariness overtaking him. He closed his eyes for a moment.

The minister opened his eyes when Dubois asked, "Where is Lucas?"

"What is left of him is dead," Sam answered. "Only God knows why he went—out there," he gestured with a big

hand.

"Dead!" Father Haskell said numbly.

"He went because he said you'd go after— Them," Father Dubois poured himself and Haskell a glass of wine. "Lucas said he had to give you an edge—somehow. He said you had the courage of a gladiator, but you wouldn't stop to think things out before committing yourself. I guess he was right. How did he die?"

"When I found him," Sam's words were tinged with weariness, "those . . . things had been at him." He looked at the heads on the floor.

"Had they touched him?" Dubois asked.

"Clawed him and bitten him. He was bleeding badly." Sam looked at Dubois. "I think you know the rest."

"You killed him." It was a statement.

"Yes."

Haskell clasped his hands together and silently prayed.

Dubois poured Sam a short bourbon, then covered the heads with a towel from his kitchen. "Tell us what happened, Sam."

Sam was exhausted. He put his head back on the sofa and closed his eyes. He had told the men everything, telling them of John Benton's condition, and God and Satan fighting on the crest of the hill, everything that had occurred that night. Now, he felt drained.

Dubois said, "You did the right thing, Sam. It was the only thing you could have done. I believe I would have done the same. I like to think so. God has forgiven you. I will expect you to do the same if they come for me. And some . . . thing will."

Sam met the older man's eyes. "You seem awfully sure, Michael."

"Oh, they'll come, Sam. Some . . . thing will destroy me. I've been preparing myself for that day. Ever since I felt them surface—drawing breath."

"Michael, there are many things I do not understand," Sam confessed, wanting, seeking answers to questions filling his head.

"There are many things / don't understand," Dubois smiled. "When I was a young priest in Montreal, I thought I knew it all. But, of course, I did not. About the Beasts, Sam—did Lucas call them God's mistakes?"

"Yes."

"I've always felt it best not to question God. The Beasts might be His mistake. I don't know. If they are—" The old priest shrugged, his eyes cloudy.

Sam realized he would not get much more from Dubois concerning the Beasts' survival or creation. The priest felt very close to death; perhaps he did not wish to antagonize God this close to meeting Him.

Sam said, "Lucas told me—he said the devil calls out the Beasts when he needs them. Why, then, have people around here been seeing them for years? Or so they claim. Seeing them, and smelling them?"

"I argued with Lucas many times over the years, Sam. We did not agree on the Beasts. I—I believe the people heard and smelled the guardian of the Beasts. The Sentry, if you will. I believe Duhon and my ancestor, Father Dubois, saw the Sentry. He killed them."

"But the tablet remained hidden until recently?"

"Yes. I'll say this much, Sam, it was Lucas's belief that over the past hundred and fifty years, God and Satan fought out near the Dig site. I disagreed in part with him. I've been out there hundreds of times over the past thirty years. I used to go out there and spend entire afternoons, just feeling the powers move silently around me. No, Sam, I believe God and Satan have fought out there for *thousands* of years. Obviously, if one studies the ancient carvings and drawings on the stones at the Dig, I will not be alone in my belief. Why they fought there?" he shrugged. "I don't know. I don't believe any mortal will ever know."

"Until death?"

"Perhaps."

"Answer this, Michael, why has there not been some reputable archaeological teams in here to study the site?"

"I can't answer that, Sam, other than to say the people in this part of Fork County never speak of the site. I never heard of it until I went prowling one day. It was—I suppose, that night of terror after Wade's father was killed that closed people's mouths around here."

Sam nodded, rising to his feet. He would get no more from Dubois. "I'll go home, now." The exhaustion in him was visible.

"Will you attend John's funeral tomorrow?" Haskell asked.

"Such as it will be, yes. Is there nothing we can do about John's condition?" he directed the question at Dubois.

"Not yet," the priest replied. He glanced at the towel-

covered heads. "I'll dispose of those."

But Sam did not drive straight home. Instead, he drove the streets of Whitfield—looking. For what, he didn't know. Just looking. Then it came to him while he drove: not one person was out this night. No one. And for a Saturday night, that was odd.

He drove by Margie's Cafe. Closed and dark. Normally, it would have been far too early for that. The theatre was closed. The drive-in, where the kids usually congregated, was shut down tight. Homes were dark, foreboding, but Sam could feel eyes on him as he slowly prowled the streets.

"Strange," he muttered. "It's as if the town has died, and I'm the only one left alive."

He knew that was not true, but he had to fight down the panic that suddenly grew in him.

He drove past the town's taverns. All dark.

Dark. Matching the night.

As Sam slept that night, he dreamed of Jane Ann. He tried to push her from his dreams, but her presence was too strong. He dreamed of making love to her, awakening with a guilty conscience.

From the pulpit, the church appeared cavernous to Sam. Only a handful of people sat in the auditorium. With the exception of Wade and Anita, Chester and Faye, and Jane Ann, all others were elderly. Michelle was not present. She had not returned to the parsonage when Sam had left for church, and he had no idea where she might be.

He really didn't care.

He looked out and down at Jane Ann. Their eyes met. Sam smiled, more to himself than at her. So, this is love? he thought. How ludicrous! The town is facing destruction from forces so evil as to be unspeakable; I'm not sure what can be done about it; and yet here I stand, grinning like a schoolboy with his first infatuation.

Sam began speaking extemporaneously, for he had prepared no text. He spoke calmly and firmly, trying to soothe the old people, for they were afraid, he could see it and sense it. They were facing an unknown, and Sam really did not know how to calm them. He did know he could not tell them of the evil that was near—they would either go into a panic or think him a fool.

He did not know what to do about them, and he had given it much thought. They were going to suffer, and there was

nothing he could do about it.

That thought shamed Sam, but he had to face it. In the fight he knew was coming, the strong— as many as possible —had to survive, even Father Dubois admitted that. The strong faithful had to survive; they could not face the threat of extinction protecting those lives that had very nearly run their course.

It was a cruel and ugly choice, but Sam knew it had to be. He hoped God would forgive him his ugly decision.

Some of them might survive, but—

Sam spoke of the glory of God; His love for mankind, and of the peace that awaited them all when they finally reached the safety of His arms.

But it was not enough; not really what they wanted to hear; not really what Sam passionately wanted to tell them. The elderly wanted their fears allayed, and Sam could not do that. He felt sick because of it. His close friends, Chester, Faye, Jane Ann, Wade, and Anita; they felt his vocal inadequacies, and their hearts went out to their minister.

Sam thought of the agony Miles and Doris must be experiencing.

Somehow, he struggled through the sermon, cutting it short. Finally, he stood at the door, shaking each hand, pitifully few of them. His heart was sad as he shook the old, withered hands. They work all their lives, he thought, believing in God, and their minister deserts them in their most grave time of need.

Dear God, forgive me!

"It's all this rock and roll music," an elderly lady told him. "That's what's driving the young people away from God."

"I'm sure that has something to do with it, Mrs. Findley," Sam smiled. Tell the old people what they want to hear, Sam. Lie! Stand here in the House of God and lie.

"It's just a shame and disgrace!" Mr. Woodward said, taking Sam's hand.

"What is, sir?"

"Someone killed off every one of my chickens last night. Tore the heads off of 'um. Shame and disgrace to do that to an old man like me."

"Did you report it to the police?"

"Uh! I called the sheriff, all right. Said he'd come right out. Never did show up."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Woodward. Is there anything I can do?" You can tell the truth, Sam. But he knew he could not do that.

"Don't expect so, preacher. 'Less you got the power to bring all my hens to life."

"Just the hens?"

"That's what so funny 'bout it. They never touched a one of my roosters."

Because the devil is afraid of a crowing cock. "Call me if there is anything I can do, sir."

"Where is Michelle this morning?" an elderly lady asked, in a not-too-subtle stage whisper. Twenty heads swung around, forty ears straining.

In normal times, Sam would have told a small fib. Today, though, he didn't care. "I haven't the faintest idea, Mrs. Hardison." He wanted to add: and really, I don't give a hoot where she is.

Mrs. Hardison nodded, then marched out of the church, chin up, head high, all her suspicions confirmed. The Balons were, indeed, having marital problems.

"Gossipin' old biddy!" Mr. Word muttered, shaking Sam's hand. The elderly retired rancher met Sam's eyes. "Something .. . nasty happenin' in this town, Brother Balon. I'd like to comfort some of these old ladies, but I don't know how to go about it without scarin' 'em half out of their wits."

Sam looked in the auditorium. Chester, Faye, Wade, Anita, and Jane Ann all stood in a group, waiting for Sam to finish.

"How do you mean, Mr. Word? Nasty?"

"Don't try kiddin' me, Sam—I'm too old a bird. Ninety-nine percent of the church-goin' population of Whitfield has stopped goin' People ain't friendly toward one another anymore. Lot's of other things, too."

Sam felt a glimmer of hope. Perhaps Mr. Word could gather up the old people, hide them in the Bad Lands. But who would protect them? Sam and his little group would be spread too thin.

"And what do you think it is, Mr. Word?"

The elderly gentleman plopped his hat on his head, and said, "Khrushchev and those damned Russians. Put something in the water!"

Sam felt his slight hope drift away. "Perhaps it is the devil, Mr. Word?"

The old man laughed. "That's a good one, Sam. The devil! No, son, the devil don't want Whitfield. Don't *nobody* want Whitfield." He walked away, chuckling.

I tried, Sam thought. I tried.

Mr. Word gathered a half dozen or more elderly outside

the church and they all had a good laugh, at Sam's expense.

Sam sighed. I wish it was the Russians. They would be a lot easier to deal with.

Jane Ann touched his arm. "Sam? You want to ride with us this afternoon. To John's funeral?"

He had not told them about John.

He agreed. "I'll be at Chester's about one-thirty. I don't believe there'll be much of a crowd at the funeral, though."

Her hand was warm on his arm. "I'm frightened, Sam. Why can't we just run? Just get out?"

"And do what once we got there? Besides, it's too late for that, I think. We're being watched." He glanced across the street. "Look."

Vanderwerf and Moore lounged across the street, watching the church. Vanderwerf saw Jane Ann looking at him and arrogantly scratched his crotch, grinning at her. He feigned masturbation with one hand, motioning for her to come on over with the other hand.

"Not the most subtle gesture I've ever seen," she said, her face flushing.

Sam didn't help matters any by saying, "It's going to get much, much worse before it gets any better, Janey."

"You're supposed to comfort me, Sam," she looked at him.

And the minister came very close to saying, I'd like to do just that, dear—in a variety of ways.

He remembered where he was and was embarrassed for his thoughts.

"Twenty people!" Chester shook his head. "Twenty people showed up for the funeral. Disgraceful!"

"John's wife wasn't even there," Jane Ann said, her tone indicating disapproval, even a primness that brought a smile from Sam.

"She was with the sheriff and George Best," Wade said. "The two of them were at her house. You all saw the cars when we drove by."

"Doing what, I wonder?" Anita questioned.

"Don't be such a klupper," Doris raised an eyebrow.

"While her husband was being buried!" Anita could not believe it.

"She no longer has any control over herself," Sam spoke quietly, then grimaced. "Besides, she's been seeing Walter for at least a month— maybe longer."

Sam had told them of John on the way to the services, and

they had, to a person, looked at him with horror in their eyes as he spoke of the Undead. None of them wanted to believe him, but they knew Sam would not lie about this.

"Sam? Sam!" Jane Ann brought him out of his musings. "Are you certain about Mrs. Benton?"

"Yes, he's sure," Miles said. "So am I. I saw them coming out of a motel in Atwood, about two months ago."

"I don't think any of this matters anymore," Chester rose from his chair, stretching. "I think what matters now is this: everything is out in the open—at least as far as I'm concerned. You might say battle lines have been drawn. We know who is with us, and who is against us." His glance swept each person. "And the odds aren't very good."

"Did you speak with Peter?" Sam asked.

"Yes. But I didn't tell him of my suspicions; he told me of *his*. He said he'd meet us here about four this afternoon. After we all talk with him, we'll do what we talked about."

Anita looked up, alarm on her face. "What are you men going to do?"

"Go for a drive," Sam said.

"You're not going to leave us here alone?"

"No," Sam shook his head. "Miles will stay with you."

Doris looked at her husband, a twinkle in her eyes. "Miles, I love you dearly, you know that. But when you came home yesterday, wobbling in with that huge shotgun, you looked like the original Sad Sack."

The tension in the room broke under the sounds of laughter. Miles grinned shyly. "I know how to load it, point it, and pull the trigger. Besides, let them," he indicated the other men, "go traipsing out in the wilderness. I'd much rather stay here, surrounded by all you beautiful women." He grinned rakishly.

His wife rolled her eyes. "Casanova didn't have—to the best of my knowledge—hemorrhoids, dear."

"Doris!"

The ringing of the phone stilled the laughter. Chester held the phone out to Sam. "Tony."

"Sam? I've just been called out to Sorenson's ranch. I don't like it, Sam. I'm not his doctor, Sam—he dislikes me, always has. I think something's up. I don't know what, I just sense it,"

"Then don't go."

"I—ah—don't have much choice in the matter. The sheriff is coming by to pick me up."

"Tony, don't go! Tell them you're sick— anything. No!

Better yet, tell Walter I'll take you out there. Let's see what happens when he hears that."

"Come on over, Sam. Right now. Please?"

"Five minutes, Tony." He turned, looking at Wade. "You stay here with Miles. Come on, Ches. Get a pistol and let's go. I'll explain on the way. We'll take that drive tomorrow."

"Balon," the sheriff glared at him. "Just what do you want here? This is none of your affair."

The men stood on the sidewalk outside Tony's house. Sam did his best to remain calm. "What I'm saying, Walter, is this, I'll drive Tony out to the K/S. It's no big deal; nothing to get all worked up about. Tony asked me to come along, and I'll do just that. By the way, who is sick? Can I help?"

Sam received a look of pure hatred from the sheriff. While Addison was glaring at Sam, Tony took a closer look at Walter. The man was filthy. His clothing dirty, his face unshaven, and his body odor fierce. The doctor was glad he wasn't standing downwind.

Walter shifted his glare to Sam's truck. "What's Stokes doing here?"

"Just along for the ride, Walter. Any harm in that? Oh, by the way, we missed you at John's services this afternoon."

The sheriff wheeled about without speaking. He stalked to his car, burning rubber as he peeled away from the curb.

"Sam?" Tony said. "What in the world is going on in this town?"

"What did Mrs. Norman die of, Tony?"

"Presumably the same thing John died of. But I don't believe it. I had just examined her about a month ago. Her heart was strong, blood pressure fine. You didn't answer my question, Sam."

"Then what killed her?"

The young doctor sighed as he met Sam's gaze. "Oh, one guess would be fright, maybe—producing a heart attack. When I saw her she'd been dead for hours. I think the old woman saw something in her back yard that scared her to death. That big German shepherd was still standing guard beside her. I guess he frightened off whatever it was."

"You went to her house, then?"

"Oh, yes. Jimmy called me first, then Father Dubois."

"Was there anything . . . unusual that you noticed?"

"What do you mean, Sam?"

"An odor, perhaps?"

Tony slowly shook his head. "Yes, now that you mention it, there was an odor. A very bad odor. Faint, but still present. I—uh—can't describe it; I've never smelled anything quite like it."

"I was afraid of this. They've begun coming into town."

"I beg your pardon, Sam?"

"Get your car, Tony—follow us to Chester's. There's something you'd better hear."

A very stunned and pale young doctor sat on the couch in Chester's den, his coffee cold and forgotten on the table. He lifted his eyes to Sam's. "You're kidding, of course?" There was a hopeful tone in his voice.

"No, Tony," Father Dubois said. "It's all true."

The priest had been called, as had Father Haskell. Peter Canford stood beside Jimmy Perkins.

"Reverend Monroe is dead!" Jimmy said. "And you killed him, Sam? My God!"

Peter spoke for the first time, other than the greetings when he entered the house. His voice was dead, almost void of emotion. "When I got home from John's funeral, there was a note. Pat said she'd had enough of my so-called Christian ways. The note was very profane." He put his face in his hands and wept.

Dubois walked to his side, putting an arm around his shoulders. He did not try to verbally comfort him, just patted him on the shoulder, letting the young man know he was there, ready to help in any way he could.

"I'll make some coffee," Faye said.

"And some sandwiches," Anita said, getting up from her chair. "I'll help you."

"Have you had time to read the journals?" Sam asked Wade.

"Yes," the editor said, "some of them. Dad suspected all along what is—" he stumbled for a moment, "happening here now. But he couldn't come up with any concrete proof. None to take to the law. I know the feeling," he said, biting at his words. "Dad wrote that he felt the devil was after him, but he wasn't going to get him."

"That's why he shot himself?" Sam asked.

Chester looked up. "Your father shot himself?"

Slowly, Wade told the story, filling in the gaps that for years had puzzled many residents of Whitfield, himself included. "But pieces still don't fit," he mused aloud. "There

are things that just don't quite jell in my mind. About us, I mean."

"Yes," his wife said. "We were just talking about that in the kitchen. Why us? Why were we—spared?"

Jane Ann put her coffee cup carefully on the table, in the saucer, her face a study in concentration. "Sam? Did you ever listen to the local radio station?"

"Rarely, but I think I know what you're getting at. I've had the same suspicions of late. Go ahead, though, let me hear your thoughts."

She looked at each person in the den. "Did any of you ever listen to the station?"

"No," Chester said. "Can't stand country and western music, and I certainly can't tolerate this new rock and roll. Besides, when I did accidently tune in, I got nervous. I mean—I felt strange when I listened."

They all denied ever listening very much to the local station. But all admitted when they did listen, it made them nervous.

"For years," Jimmy said, "it was kind of a blah station. The old people listened to it mostly. Then, after Sorenson bought it, he brought in a whole new crew; changed the programing completely. Hillbilly for the adults, rock and roll for the kids."

"That's right," Peter said. "Something else, too; after Sorenson bought it, he stopped all religious programing. On Sunday's, it was all rock and roll."

"It wasn't a very powerful station, was it?" Sam asked.

"No," Wade said. "Two hundred and fifty watts. And the tower was in a bad location, so I'm told. Twenty miles out of town, you couldn't pick it up."

"And the nearest town is over forty miles away," Jane Ann added.

"This new crew Sorenson brought in," Sam said, "was there anything—odd about them?"

Most agreed they never saw much of them. They tended to stay by themselves, in a mobile home.

"Yes," Jimmy said. "Yes, there was something. I remember now. They all wore medallions about their necks."

"That's right!" Wade snapped his fingers. "I always thought it was some kind of station symbol, or something like that."

"It was," Sam said. "Of the worst kind."

"What does the station have to do with all this, Sam?" Father Haskell asked.

"Mind implantation. The government has proven it. It works."

"I'm afraid I'm a bit behind times," Dubois confessed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"The message would be very short," Sam said. "Perhaps one tenth of a second. So short the conscious mind would not realize it had heard anything. But the subconscious would record and remember it. Over a period of months, a person would have heard that message millions of times. It would be a part of them. If the message played on some secret desire, such as—oh—sex, power, money, revenge—whatever—a person could be won over. Like hypnotism, only much more insidious."

Chester nodded. "Yes, now I recall. Jack and Ruby would lock themselves in a bedroom, listening to the rock and roll. When it was over, or if one of us would make them turn it off, they'd be surly, restless; they would want to do—wild things. And *did* do them!"

Jimmy rose to pace the den. "My girl did the same thing. I used to have to make her turn the radio down or off. She was receiving messages from it."

"The same with my wife," Peter noted. "I bought her an expensive combination radio/Hi-Fi set just so she could listen to that crap!"

"But, Sam?" Doris asked. "Why didn't it affect all the kids? It didn't seem to bother our two. Or Wade or Anita's."

"I can't answer that, Doris. I just don't know."

"Our kids never listened much to the radio," Anita said. "We," she looked at her husband, "always listened to classical music. So did Miles and Doris's kids. We became friends partly because of our mutual interest in good music."

"Of late," Chester said, "oh, probably within the last six months, our two have begun running with some—well, wild kids. Guess that's where they got hooked. I'd try to talk with them, so did Faye, but it just seemed to bounce right off them."

It was late afternoon, the shadows moving through the town, thickening around the houses.

"Don't be afraid," Father Dubois smiled, sensing the fear building in some of the people. "This is God's day. Satan can make no move against us on this day."

"What do we do?" Tony asked.

"This is what we do," Sam took command, leaning forward, speaking softly.

FOURTEEN

Dark when Sam reached the parsonage. The lights were on in the living room. With a dull feeling in his guts, Sam realized Michelle was home and he would have to face her. He hated her!

A virile man, Sam's sex life had been nil for months, and he was very much aware of his need for a woman. His groin told him so when he had looked at Jane Ann that afternoon. The women he had known before becoming a minister walked naked through his mind. Soft breasts and erect nipples, satin-smooth legs, wet mouths, and . . .

He forced those thoughts from his mind as he got out of the car. "I don't see how priests do it," he muttered.

The odor in the house hit him when he opened the door. The smell of stale sweat, unwashed bodies, and the musky smell of sex. Everything that had occurred the past days fell on Sam's mind, overpowering the big man. Wild rage raced through him, hot and uncontrolled, overwhelming reason. He stalked through the house, seeking Michelle.

The door to her bedroom was closed. He tried the knob. Locked. Sam forced the door open. Michelle lay on the bed, naked, her legs spread wide, fingers busy within the dark mass of pubic hair at her apex.

The stench in the closed room was vile.

Michelle's breasts, full and heavy, were marked with bruises. Her knees were scratched. She had not washed herself, and the room stank with the scent of the unfaithful, the betrayer, the Godless.

The medallion hung about her neck, between her breasts, her nipples swollen with passion. Michelle's breath was quick, in her anticipated self-induced climax.

She opened her eyes; eyes dark with fury. "Get out of my room!" she hissed at him. "GET OUT!" she screamed.

Sam's temper boiled to the surface. All the rage and disgust and frustration rose up, yelling to be freed. "You Godless whore!" he shouted at her, grabbing her by one ankle, jerking her from the bed. She yelped as her bare butt hit the floor.

Michelle spat profanities at him, the filth spewing from her mouth. Sam slapped her, his big hand hard on her face, back-handing her twice. He tore the medallion from her neck,

breaking the heavy chain, and threw it across the dimly-lit bedroom. The medallion bounced off a wall. His wife squalled at him, face ugly with rage and hate.

"Goddamn you!" she kicked at him with bare feet.

Sam dodged the kick and dragged her, by the heels, across the room into the bathroom. She howled and fought him. Shoving her into the shower stall, he turned the water on full force, adjusting the water temperature, then tossed a bar of soap onto the floor of the stall.

"I really don't want to touch you," he said. "But if I have to, I'll scrub the stink off you."

She laughed at him, her lips pulled back in a snarling grimace. Sitting on the floor of the stall, the water pasting her black hair to her skull, Michelle lewdly spread her legs wide, exposing herself to him.

Her fingers hooked inside her labia, she opened herself. "Wouldn't you like to fuck me, Sam? Come on, honey—I'll give you some pussy."

Sam hit her with his fist. He hit her a short, hard, chopping right, his big fist catching her on the side of the jaw. Her head snapped back, banging against the side of the stall. She slumped forward onto the wet floor, unconscious.

Sam washed her, soaping her again and again until her body was red from the abrading of the washcloth. He washed her long hair until it squeaked. She groaned, shook her head, and tried to bite him. He popped her again with his fist and she was still.

Sam dragged her out of the stall, dried her, and carried her to his bedroom, dumping her on the sheets. With rope from the storeroom, Sam bound her, tying her hands to the headboard, her feet to the base of the frame. He tossed a blanket over her nakedness. She lay glaring up at him, eyes wild with fury.

"Bastard!" she hissed. "You'll die for this."

"One of us will," he promised her, stripping off his wet clothing.

Her eyes lingered at his groin. "Fuck me, Sam!" she begged him. "I need it!"

He looked at her in disgust, then turned his back to her. He walked into the bathroom, drying himself, changing clothes. Her screaming followed him through the house as he dialed the rectory for Father Dubois.

Quickly, he told the priest what he'd done. "I need your help, Michael. Can you come over here?"

"Five minutes, Sam."

He met the priest on the front porch, watching as Dubois blessed the house with prayer and Holy Water.

"Will this work, Michael?"

"If it doesn't," the old priest said grimly, "it will kill her."

"Isn't she already dead?" Sam's voice was harsh.

"Yes, son, she is, in a manner of speaking. Come on, this is not going to be pleasant."

The men followed the sounds of screaming, cursing, snarling.

"You picked a good day for this," Dubois glanced at his watch. "We have about three and a half hours 'til midnight. I think it best we do it by then."

In the bedroom, Michelle snarled at the sight of them, her eyes rolling back in her head, only the white showing at the sight of the Bible in Dubois's hand. She spat at him, the spittle catching him on the cheek. He wiped it away with a handkerchief, careful not to let any of the spit touch his lips.

"What do we do, Michael?"

The priest knelt by the bed. "Pray, Sam—let me do the rest. Pray harder than you've ever prayed in your life. We've got to fill this room with the power of God."

And the men prayed.

Michelle howled like an animal on the bed, fighting her bonds until her ankles and wrists were raw and bleeding. She cursed their prayers, screamed as the Holy Water touched her flesh. She yelled filth and profanity, working as hard against the exorcism as they worked toward saving her soul.

Dogs barked in the streets of Whitfield; the crow, the owl, the night hawk hooted and cawed and screeched their outrage; and a summer storm sprang up in the dark skies, sending flashes of lightning licking across the heavens, thunder rolling in waves.

And the men prayed and worked.

Michelle strained against her bonds, blasphemy from her tongue opposing the supplications from the men of God.

An owl bashed itself to blood and broken feathers against the house, the Doberman from across the street ran around the parsonage, frantically seeking entrance into the house, its blood-lust high, the only thought in its brain: KILL. And in the homes of the possessed in Whitfield, eyes turned in the direction of the parsonage, mouths snarled, and tongues uttered chants learned in the pits of Hell.

"NNNOOO!" Michelle screamed, lunging against the bonds

that held her. Her body arched upward in pain.

The minutes passed into hours as the power of God fought the mind-possessing tyranny of the devil. Michelle seemed to grow no weaker as the sweat gathered on her body, darkening the sheets.

Sam placed his hand on her forehead. "Speak of God's love, Michelle. Ask Him for help. Ask him! He will help."

She snarled and attempted to bite Sam. "Fuck God!" she hissed. "Fuck Jesus! Praise the Prince of Darkness. Hail the Lord of Flies!"

She pulled back her lips and the men watched in horror as her teeth yellowed, enlarging, becoming fanged. Her eyes narrowed to slanted slits, yellow shining from the crooked apertures.

Father Dubois drenched her with Holy Water, and she squalled in pain, the metamorphosis reversing as she transformed back into Michelle.

"I thought so," the priest muttered. He rose from his kneeling, a look of hate on his usually serene face. "It's no use. She's one of Them. Very old."

Sam had backed against a wall, seemingly frozen there. Not so much from fear, although that was certainly a part of it, but more from shock at what he had lived with for years.

Dubois glanced at his watch. "Five minutes," he muttered. "Only five more minutes and *she'll* have us."

He walked out of the room, returning with a broom. He handed the broom to Sam. "Break it, Sam. I need a stake." Sam hesitated. "BREAK IT!" Dubois shouted, slapping Sam across the mouth.

Sam came out of his shock with a lurch. He snapped the broom handle, leaving one end jaggedly pointed. "Sorry, Michael," he apologized. "It just got to me."

"Watch me, son," the priest ordered. "For when I'm gone, it's going to be up to you to do this—and you will have to do it many, many times. Be strong."

And Sam watched in horror as the priest whirled, raised the stake with both hands, and brought it down, the jagged point driving into Michelle's chest.

Blood spewed from her mouth, both men ducking to avoid the gushing crimson.

But Michelle would not die.

She howled at them, blood spraying from her lips. Her teeth grew fanged, her eyes wild and yellow.

"Missed the heart," Dubois said calmly, ignoring her shrieks

of pain. "Pull the stake out for me, Sam. I don't have the strength."

Sam jerked the stake from his wife's chest. He gave the dripping stick to Dubois.

The priest raised the stake far above his head. "Give me the strength, my God, to destroy this creature of Satan. In Your name, Lord." He drove the stake deep into Michelle's heart.

Still she howled as the hands of the clock drew only seconds from midnight. The town seemed to hold its breath. All the howling from the animals had ceased; no birds called in the night.

Dubois was covered with sweat from his exertions. He worked the stake deeper into her chest. As the stake ruined the heart, the woman on the bed changed before their eyes. Where there had once been a healthy, beautiful woman, there was now a dirty hag. The hag changed again, into a smaller younger woman, but a woman covered with thick hair. The transformation back into time continued to run its course, until what was left on the bed did not in any way resemble a human form.

The thing on the bed was of such horrible features it was disgusting to look upon. It was an animal, but it was more; it was a Beast, but it was not. It was, to Sam, indescribable.

A stench filled the room, winding throughout the house. Both Sam and Father Dubois fought back vomit at the smell. It was the odor of thousands of years of evil, of sickness of the soul.

Wiping his face with his hand, Sam said, "You mean—you mean, I've been married to THAT? All this time!" He looked at Dubois. "You never liked her. I sensed that. You KNEW!"

"I suspected, Sam." Both men seemed unable to pull their eyes from the rancid sight on the bed. "But I could not be certain. How could I tell you? I couldn't."

Sam shuddered at the sight on the bed and of his own memories of Michelle. He was still somewhat in shock. "Wh—what do we do with her—it?"

"First we wash and change clothes. Then we wrap the thing up and take it out to Tyson's Lake. Dump it over the fence. Give it to the Beasts."

"We killed—"

"A *thing*!" Dubois finished Sam's sentence. "Something of the most perverse evil to ever walk God's earth. She—it never accepted our God, Sam. She only pretended to accept, all the while working toward her Master's ultimate goal."

"Michael, what was she?"

"One of the originals, I believe. A—witch, I suspect. She's been here on this earth for hundreds—perhaps thousands of years, in one form or another, changing with the times, and always ... waiting for her Master's signal to do evil—to strike. There is no way of knowing how much evil she has spread over her many lifetimes and lifestyles. How many lives she has ruined. She was very difficult to destroy," he mused. "She must have been very old and very powerful."

The men washed the stink from them, Sam giving Dubois some of his clothes to wear. The shirt and pants were far too large, but they were clean.

Sam rolled what was once his wife into a thick blanket, then a tarp, securing the bundle with rope. He dumped the foul-smelling thing in the back of the truck, then pulled out the Thompson submachine gun from under the seat, along with a drum and several boxes of ammunition. Walking back to the house, the Steiner's Doberman lunged at him, teeth bared, snarling. Sam kicked the animal savagely in the side, sending it away, yelping and whining in the night.

"Bastard!" the minister cursed, then looked heavenward. "Excuse me, Lord—but these are trying times."

There was a great feeling of relief in Sam concerning his late wife. It was un-Christian of him, he knew, but on this he could not control his emotions.

In the house, the priest seemed able to read his thoughts. "Think of it this way, Sam, you were never married in the eyes of God. The ceremony was a farce from beginning to end. Put her out of your mind, for she never existed in God's eyes."

"How do you have the power to get inside my head like that? How did you know what I was thinking?"

Dubois smiled, almost laughed. "Nothing mystical, Sam, I assure you." He looked very frail, Sam's clothing hanging on him. "I saw the love in your eyes when you looked at Jane Ann this afternoon. Pure love. Good love, as it should be between a man and a woman. You need her, and she needs you. Now you're free to speak to her of your love, and she of hers. It will be a strong union, Sam, for as long—" He stopped abruptly.

"I know, Michael. You can go ahead and say it. I'm not going to survive this fight. I know that. I'll beat the devil here, but he'll kill me in the process. Won't he?"

Dubois's eyes were cloudy. "I—wish, I hope you and Jane

Ann produce a son, Sam. There is time; you must!"

"I said something last evening, Michael, after the devil finished his games with me. I remember saying: 'We'll meet again. Me or mine.' And I don't know why I said it."

The priest said nothing, just slowly nodded his head, watching Sam feed cartridges into the sixty round drum for the SMG. He smiled. "Good, Sam—good! You're girding your loins for the fight. It will be up to you to lead."

Sam's gaze was level. "Why me, Michael? And why do you want a son of mine to be born? To be conceived in the midst of all this horror?"

The old priest shrugged. "I rarely question God, son—it's not good business for mortals. I simply believe you've been chosen—by Him. And that is that."

Driving out to the lake, past the darkened homes of Whitfield, the bundle of filth rolling and bumping in the bed of the truck, Sam said, "Michelle could not have been the only one of her kind. There has to be more."

"Yes, Sam, many of them. Probably in every town and city in the world. But not like Michelle. There are, I believe, relatively few like her—thank the Lord. But those who can be easily swayed into accepting Satan's doctrine of evil? Millions, Sam, millions. Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Moslem. In most cases they don't know they can be—and most would deny it. But if one knows what to look for, they are easily spotted. They are the rumor-spreaders, the gossip-mongers, the profane. They are the hypocrites, the people who condemn others for their faith, or because of their skin, or the slant of their eyes, or, just look at that filth, Hitler, because one is a Jew. They are the vicious, both physically and verbally. I could go on and on, but you know as well as I."

"I know there are some people in this world who need killing," Sam said bluntly.

Dubois chuckled. "My, you are a maverick, aren't you? He chose well."

"What you said, Michael; that takes in about sixty or seventy percent of the population."

"At least, Sam. Heaven, my boy, will be sparsely populated. And there are going to be a lot of very surprised people come Judgment Day."

Sam chuckled. "I hope I won't be one of them."

"You won't." Dubois said it with finality.

"Thank you for that," Sam said dryly. "Michael, what you said about those types of people; most psychiatrists would argue that those people are just suffering from some type of mental problem."

Father Dubois again chuckled, darkly. "George Herbert said it best, Sam: 'He that lies with dogs, riseth with fleas.' "

"The company one keeps."

"Exactly. Most psychiatrists are, in my opinion, grossly out of touch with reality. Most eggheads are. It's very easy—convenient, even—to place a clinical term on a person who is basically just not a fit human being. And never will be," he added.

"We're entering the age of Liberalism, Sam, and it's going to be awful! 'Poor little Sammy or Johnny or Susie doesn't know right from wrong' will be the battle cry of the next couple of decades. And that has got to be one of the most ridiculous statements ever uttered from the mouths of so-called educated men. Good heavens! Pavlov taught his *dogs* right from wrong.

"Oh, certainly, Sam, there are people with mental problems. Only a fool would deny that. But as for the others I mentioned—no! You know and I know, Sam, that if we all would be willing to accept just a little less of material things, understand a little more—of those who need and want understanding, that is—what a wonderful place this earth would be. God is the answer, if people would just trust in Him, believe in Him, and do His bidding. But," again he shrugged, "they won't. Most never have; they never will."

He looked at Sam. "I've lectured you, Sam. I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

When the priest spoke again, his voice was wistful. "I'm ready to go home. I *want* to go home. I'm tired of this earth and all its troubles. Troubles, I might add, as you well know, brought on by its grasping, greedy, ignorant, bigoted, shallow, arrogant inhabitants.

"There will be a Holy War someday, Sam—of sorts. It won't be called a Holy War, but it will be one; it will be the war to end all wars, for it will be directed by God. And it will be a blood bath against the un-Holy."

"And when it's over?" Sam asked softly.

"God will end the world."

Sam dragged the tarp-wrapped carcass to the fence surrounding Tyson's Lake.

"Dump it over the fence," Dubois said.

The body dropped with a plop.

"Beasts of the night," Dubois called out, and there was a stirring in the dark timber. "Here is your sister. Come see what God's hand has destroyed."

The Beasts came to the timberline. Sam clicked the Thompson SMG off safety, lifting the muzzle. "How many of them are there?"

"The Lord only knows," Dubois whispered. "Let them come closer, if they will."

The night was silent.

"Don't you want to feast on her stinking remains?" Dubois called.

But the Beasts refused to come closer. They prowled the darkness of the timber, snarling and growling. The smell of them drifted to the men by the fence.

"They know—somehow—it's a trap," Sam said.

Father Dubois looked down at the tarp-wrapped, nonhuman thing on the other side of the fence. "Leave her. Let's go. You're free of her, Sam."

"To Hell with her!" Sam spat the words.

The priest glanced at him. He smiled. "A very blunt way of summing up a most interesting evening, son. Blunt, but accurate."

When the men had gone, and the Beasts were sure of that, they loped up from the timber to the carcass. Ripping the tarp and blanket from her, they dragged the body to the timber. There, they feasted.

Jimmy Perkins was waiting at the rectory when Sam pulled in.

"What's wrong, Jimmy?" Sam asked, looking at the young man's pale face.

"Father Haskell. He's dead! Beaten to death." He ran a shaking hand over his face. "When I went to get Doctor King, someone took the body. The body is gone!"

Dubois did not appear stunned or shocked. He crossed himself and said, "We killed one of them, they killed one of us."

"But they outnumber us, Father Dubois!" Jimmy protested.

"In a manner of speaking," the priest replied.

"There's more," the young Chief said. "Someone has just dug up John's body—carried it off with them." He looked at Sam. "What you said about the Undead; is that true?"

"Yes," Dubois answered for Sam. "They're walking the night."

Jimmy shivered. "Like in the movies?"

"With one exception," Dubois said. "This time it's real."

Sam slept fitfully the remainder of that night, the memory of what had happened to Michelle strong in his mind. He could not shake the recall of that awful evening and her transformation. At dawn, he rose from the couch—he could not bring himself to sleep in either bedroom—and made a pot of strong coffee. He sat on the porch, sipping his coffee.

Waiting.

At midmorning, he called his friends together, drove over to Chester's, and told them all what had transpired the night before. And about the death and disappearance of Haskell.

"Killed her!" Chester blurted. "You and Father Dubois?"

"Oh, my God!" Faye covered her face with her hands.

"What did you do with her?" Wade asked, his tone indicating he wanted to believe but was having extreme difficulty.

Sam told him, bluntly, leaving nothing out.

The newsman closed his eyes and shook his head. "Dear God," was all he said.

God's name, Sam thought, had been used more in the past few days than in the entire past year. He could not help thinking that in times of great stress, He is the one almost always called upon.

Tony moved to the window, looking out on the street. "Not one person moving."

"It's too early," Sam said. "The creatures of the night are still sleeping. Tony? You're armed? Good. Will you stay here with Miles? I want to take Wade and Chester for a little ride."

The watchers let them leave. They had their instructions: let the God-believers prowl all they want. They can't get out of the County; all roads are checked.

The three men rode out to Tyson's Lake in Sam's truck. Noon-hot, the sun blazing down on the earth. The men were all armed. Chester wore a .45 in a shoulder holster; Wade had a .38 belted on. He had offered no objection when Sam told him to arm himself. The skeptic was turning into a believer. But he was not quite there—yet.

Sam drove past Hoge's Pool Hall. "Look on the window,

Wade." He pointed to the upside-down cross.

Wade nodded, the muscles in his jaw bunching.

Outside of town, Sam pointed to the 666 on the side of a barn.

Again, Wade nodded. "I'm getting the message, Sam."

"I hope so," the preacher said.

"Michelle is—Michelle is really—?"

"Dead, yes." Sam spoke quietly, his voice just audible over the hum of tires and the rush of wind through the windows of the truck.

Wade looked out at the passing countryside. He said nothing.

"The lightning-blazed tree," Sam pointed out. "You can still smell it."

The men stood on the crest of the hill, overlooking Tyson's Lake, and the miles of emptiness surrounding it.

"Listen," Sam said. "Listen with all your heart and your ears. Be very still, then tell me what you hear."

The area was absolutely silent. Nothing sang, nothing barked, nothing moved. Wade shuddered. "Not a sound. Sam, I can pick up something. I don't know what it is, though."

"Evil," the minister said, touching Wade on the arm. He could feel the man's tension. "Come on. Move quietly, and be very careful. When we get to the edge of the lake, you'll be able to smell them. I believe if the odor is faint, they're in their holes or dens. If the odor is strong, they're out, watching us. Be careful when we get to the edge of the timber."

"I wish I'd brought my 30-06," Wade said.

"Are you beginning to believe?" Chester asked. Sam had to smile.

Wade chose not to reply as the men walked down the hill.

Sam stopped them by the side of the water. He pointed to the moist ground. Footprints stood out, like nothing either man had ever seen before.

Wade knelt down, inspecting them.

"Bear?" he asked hopefully.

"You know better," Sam said.

"God!" Chester said. "That smell is awful."

"Brace yourselves," Sam said. "We're moving in."

"I'm—not at all certain I want to do that," Wade rose from his inspection of the tracks.

"Come on, skeptic. I thought you wanted to feel the nail holes in the sides, hands, and feet?"

"That's not funny, preacher!"

"I didn't mean it to be. Thomas didn't find it all that amusing, either."

"All right, Sam—I'm sorry! Too much has happened too quickly, that's all."

Sam put his hand on the man's shoulder. "I'm not chiding you, Wade. I just want you to be prepared for what you're about to see in there," he nodded toward the timber, dark in the midday sun, as if no light could penetrate the evil within.

Sam felt the man stiffen under his hand. "What's wrong?"

"I saw something move in there!"

"I saw it, too," Chester said.

Sam smiled. The man's skepticism was leaving like a jet fighter. "I know. They're watching us."

Chester took his .45 from the holster, jacked a round in the chamber, put it on safety, and stuck it back in the leather. Sam looked closely at the older man. He could detect no signs of fear.

"Ready to go?" Sam asked.

Wade nodded, his fingers touching the butt of his pistol.

"All right. We'll only skirt the timber this time around."

Wade's eyes widened. "This time? You mean there is going to be a *next time*?"

"If it's not too late for us, we'll have to come back and destroy them. All of them, if possible. I think I know how—we'll use explosives."

Wade's expression was a mixture of horror, fear, and utter disbelief. "If it's not too late for us? Destroy them? Explosives? *Dear God!*"

"You must know it by now, Wade—whether you'll admit it or not—they killed your father; caused him to shoot himself. Your dad took his own life rather than become one of . . . Them."

"Yeah," the newsman reluctantly agreed. "It fits. All the disappearances over the years fit, too."

"What disappearances over the years?" Sam asked. "What do you know that I need to know?"

"I was going to tell you part of it, Sam," Chester said, not taking his eyes off the dark timber. "Wade can tell you the rest. It's something Whitfield doesn't like to talk about. Bums, hobos, wander through town, into this area, and are never seen again. I mean, they're seen going in, but never coming out. A few husbands have run away, leaving their families—they never came back. Other people have just left, not telling

folks where they were going. The town never speaks of it. We never wanted any national publicity here."

"Why?" Sam asked, realizing he was standing close to unraveling yet another mystery of this isolated part of Fork County.

"At first it was because of the ... tragedy that night. You know, when Wade's father was killed. Then, well, we made a deal with some people in government. Federal government."

"What kind of deal?"

"About the asylum," Chester said softly.

"What asylum?"

"You see," Wade smiled. "You've been here almost five years and you don't even know about it."

"Then why don't you tell me about it?" Sam planted his booted feet firmly, standing in front of the men. "I repeat: what asylum?"

"It's at the base of Crazy Pony Ridge," Chester said. "Some of the most rugged country in the state."

"I've heard of it, but I've never seen it. Never been there."

"You'd be stopped long before you got there," Wade told him. "The government leases the land; the government runs the place. Hell, Sam, probably a full ninety percent of the people in Fork don't know what it is."

"I haven't found out yet," Sam said, becoming a bit exasperated. "Perhaps one of you would be so kind as to inform me?"

"It's not something we're proud of, Sam. Do you want the story we were originally told, or the truth?"

"Both."

"The government told us it was a home for the criminally insane; the really bad ones. The ones there is no hope for. We all believed, for a while—those of us who knew about the place—they were sent here from all over the country—to spend the rest of their lives. Well, this much is true, the place is filled with homicidal raving lunatics. Now then, the government, after washing the money through several agencies, pays Fork County—this part of Fork—to allow the institution to remain—hidden away. We have good schools, Sam; the very best teachers. Haven't you ever wondered how Whitfield could afford that?"

"No. Not really. Now tell me the true story."

"They're mutants, Sam."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Mutants. I'm serious. It's a government project that, well—

something got fouled up."

"I'm waiting, friend."

Wade sighed. "Okay, I'll tell you all I know, Sam. I made friends with a government agent some years ago; about ten years ago, to be exact. During the course of the evening, and a quart of booze, he got a loose tongue and let slip some things about the asylum.

"It was just after the Manhattan Project, but this one was a real beaut. Something went wrong; really wrong. Explosion, and then a lot of people were exposed to—I don't know, Sam! Heavy water, radiation, whatever—massive doses of whatever it was. Those it didn't kill, changed into horribly disfigured lunatics. Madmen and women. It changed their whole body chemistry. Their families were told they were all killed, burned to char. Well, they weren't all killed, and Fork County has them.

"The agent clammed up; wouldn't say anything more about it. I gather that when they all die off, the institution will close its doors, all papers concerning the—whatever you want to call it—will be destroyed, and no one will be the wiser about our government's mistake."

"If they escaped—?" Sam asked, allowing the question to fade.

"It would be a disaster," Wade said. "But there is no chance of that happening. It's—like a small, well-stocked, hotel for the guards—including women for them. The guards are changed—so I was told—every six months, they never leave the grounds. The place is small, Sam, and it's partly underground. A person could walk right up to it and not see it. I mean it. The pay is really good, insuring silence from the guards."

"Does the government ever come in to inspect?"

"Rarely, Sam. The place is fully staffed with a couple of military doctors; the whole bit."

"How do they get the men in here?"

"The guards and the girls? By car and light truck. At night. The sheriff knows about it."

"Addison, too?"

"Sure."

"Leases the land, you said. From whom?"

Wade was silent for a moment, then his face paled. "Karl Sorenson."

"Do you know when the last crew came in?"

"Last month."

"How convenient," Sam said dryly. "I wonder if they were wearing medallions? Well, the Prince planned this one to the letter, didn't he?"

"Im beginning to think so," Wade admitted. This time, there was no doubt in his voice.

Sam looked at the dark timber. "Let's go. Wear your crosses outside your shirts."

As they approached the timber, Sam said, "We'll stay just to this side of the timber." He glanced at Wade. "You'll be a believer once this day is over."

"I'm a believer now," the editor replied tightly. "Believe me, I am."

"Chester?"

"I never doubted you, Sam."

Carefully, slowly, the men drew nearer. As they came closer, Sam took his .45 from leather, jacked a round in the chamber, then eased the hammer down, the weapon off safety.

"How many rounds did it take you to stop one?" Chester asked.

"Too many," the minister said tightly.

"Crazy people have enormous strength, don't they?" Chester asked.

"Yes, so I'm told."

"And if they were possessed . . . ?"

"It would be awesome," Wade answered for Sam. He was convinced.

At the Dig, Wilder smiled as he listened to the voice of his Master. He told Nydia, "Balon put it together about the asylum. He's a smart one. Most intelligent. I would enjoy sitting down with him; discussing things that really matter. Just two well-read men opening their minds to philosophical ruminations."

"I'd like for him to fuck me!" Nydia said.

"Vulgar bitch!" Wilder glared at her. "Your brains are located between your legs."

She laughed at him.

The stench around the edge of the timber was raw, an affront to human nostrils.

"Whew!" Chester wrinkled his nose. "I've never smelled anything like this."

The men stood just on the fringe of the timber. A low growl came from the murkiness. Jumpy, Wade grabbed for his pistol. Sam's hand stopped him.

"Wait," he said, removing the cross from his neck, holding it close to the timber. The Beast screamed in terror and anger, its breath fouling the summer air.

"I didn't believe it," Wade muttered. Beads of sweat hung on his face.

Sam put the cross around his neck just as another Beast screamed. This one was much closer to the men. Sam could see its red eyes glaring at them. "Look at that," he said.

Chester stood with his hand poised near the butt of his .45, hanging butt-down in the shoulder holster.

"I see it," Wade muttered, edging from the timber line. "Let's get out of here."

"Where is your journalistic inquisitiveness, Wade?" Sam smiled. He was rubbing it in a bit.

Wade said, before he thought, "Sam, don't be a smart ass!"

The minister chuckled. With one fluid motion, he jerked the .45 from leather, jacked back the hammer, and shot the Beast in the face, dead center between its tiny eyes.

The Beast screamed in pain, as crimson leaped from its shattered head. It fell forward, crashing to the ground, just at the edge of the timber, its huge clawed hands digging into the soft earth.

"One less," Sam spat on the ground in contempt.

Wade threw up his lunch as the stink from the dead Beast filled his head and his eyes took in all its horror. It didn't help a bit when Sam said, "Think what it must be like in the caves where they live."

Wade wiped his mouth with a shaky hand. "Thanks, Sam. I really needed that last crack."

"I think we'd better get out of here," Chester said. "We're not heavily armed enough to fight many of them."

"Do it slowly," Sam cautioned. "Don't run. Walk straight up the hill. I'll bring up the rear and keep an eye out."

Wade led the way up the hill without any further urgings, Chester behind him, Sam bringing up the rear. Wade's heart was pounding in his chest. He was sweating and panting, and he was amazed and just a bit angry to see his minister so calm.

"Let's watch," Sam said, squatting down, "let's see what happens."

"Sam!" Wade said, exasperated.

"We've got time, Wade. Relax. Give me a cigarette."

Chester was mildly amused at Sam's calmness. He thought: I can understand how he won all those medals.

"Sam!" Wade repeated. "We've got to get to town. We've got to warn the others. We've got to call the authorities."

Sam glanced up at him, amusement in his eyes. "What authorities do you suggest we call?"

"Why—why—" The newsman was silent for a time, realizing there was no one to call; that Father Dubois was right. They were in this alone.

The men stood on the hill and watched some . . . thing drag the dead Beast into the timber. Wade said, "We've got to call the government, Sam. I know that for a fact. We have to tell them about what's happening. They'll send in troops to cover the asylum, at least."

Sam rose to his feet. "I'm sure you have the number right at hand," he smiled. "And the operator will allow your call to go through?"

Wade sighed in resignation. "Yeah. Right. I feel like a mouse in a box; nowhere to go. All right, Sam, but we can still run—I think. Can't we?"

"We've been all over that, Wade." Sam fished in the editor's pocket for a Pall Mall. He lit it, then said, "How many ways in and out of Whitfield?"

"There are still county roads we can use."

"I don't think so. We're being watched. They would never allow us to leave." Wade faced the minister on the hill. "But that's just part of it, isn't it, Sam? You don't *want* to leave, do you? You *want* to make a fight of it, don't you?"

"Yes," Sam admitted. "I do." "So do I," Chester said. "I'm not running." "Then think about the women!" Wade protested.

"I have thought about them," Chester said. And of the elderly. I know Sam has, too. And it makes him just as sick as it does me. If we stay we can't help them; if we run we can't help them. Look, Wade, I've talked this over with Faye. She's afraid, yes, but she said where I go, she goes. Whitfield is our home, and we're not running." The editor looked at Sam. The minister nodded. "That's the way it is, Wade."

"All right," Wade nodded. "All right!" He seemed to grow taller; to suddenly have more rage. "Then let's do it." The men walked down the hill to the fence.

At the Dig, Black Wilder smiled. "A most formidable enemy," he said to the wind, and the wind sighed. "Yes,

indeed a *most* formidable enemy. I shall enjoy this fight." Nydia, the beautiful witch, looked at him. "I will have Sam Balon, Black. You'll see."

"Perhaps," the man said. "Perhaps."

The men drove back to town, silent at the start of the drive, for each man's thoughts were busy. Sam, planning the next move, attempting to race ahead of the devil, wondering what was next. Wade, trying to force his mind to digest all that had happened and wondering if they were all just a bit insane? Chester, mentally reverting to the Marine Corps, his mind busy with defense tactics and what weapons he had in the store they could use.

Sam spotted a huge oak tree just off the road. He slowed, then stopped.

"Something wrong?" Wade asked. "Other than the obvious, that is."

Sam shook his head. "Ches, there's a small axe wrapped in a tarp in the bed. Get it, please, and that machete, too. We may as well do this—get it over with while we have the time."

"Do what, Sam?" Wade asked.

The minister's eyes were bleak. "Come on."

At the tree, Sam cut off half a dozen branches, then cut those into smaller lengths, each about two and a half feet long. Using the axe, he fashioned a crude point on one end of the stakes, leaving the other end flat.

Wade watched him work, standing back out of his way, remaining silent. Finally, he could no longer contain his curiosity. "What are you doing, Sam?"

"You know anything about a Coven, Wade?" Sam whittled as he spoke.

"Almost nothing."

"Then imagine a circle within a circle within a circle. The outer circle is composed of, in this case, the Beasts. They can fall prey to anything that can kill a mortal. I don't know why that is, I have a theory; because they are Beasts, and human; they do not have the intelligence to grasp the devil's powers. That's my theory, anyway. Inside the next circle, closer to the devil's agent, you have—well, let's call them workers, stooges, whatever. They, too, can be destroyed by anything that would kill a mortal. A bullet, a life, a club. At least, I *hope* I'm correct in that hypothesis. Inside the last circle, the smallest circle, we'll find the real evil." He looked at his

friends. "Like Michelle. And there is only one way they can be killed." He held up a sharpened stake.

"Just like in the movies," Chester said, without any mirth. His voice was tight with emotion as he looked at the stake in Sam's big fist.

"What about this tablet?" Wade asked.

"I think if we can find it, and destroy it, we'll have whipped him—at least in Fork. But I don't hold much hope of finding the tablet. It will be well hidden."

"Well, let's storm the Dig site," Chester suggested. "You've got the Thompson, I've got my Greaser. We can get some dynamite—make some Cocktails. We can blow them back to Hell!"

Sam shook his head. "Too many of them, Ches. We've got to take those in power out first—one at a time. And now, we've got that asylum to worry about. And don't think for a minute Satan didn't figure on it, too." Sam had two dozen stakes lying on the ground. "Help me with these, please."

Arms full of stakes, the men walked back to the road, dumping the stakes in the bed of the truck.

On the way back to Whitfield, Wade asked, "Tell me the truth, Sam, do we have a chance?"

"I believe so. A little less than even."

"Sixty-forty, huh?"

"Something like that."

"Those are not the greatest odds I've ever heard," Chester commented.

"But we have something on our side they don't," Sam grinned.

"I'd be very much relieved to know what that is," Wade said.

Sam very briefly met his gaze. "God."

Just before reaching the outskirts of Whitfield, Wade said, "Glen Haskell, Sam. His body, I mean. Is he—?"

"One of them, I would imagine. I know John is."

Chester shuddered.

In front of the drive-in, the county road was blocked by milling teenagers and their cars and pickup trucks. The three men watched as a young man openly and carelessly caressed the buttocks of a teenage girl. The young man cupped both cheeks of her denim-clad rump. The girl giggled obscenely, rubbing against his crotch.

"That's the new preacher's daughter," Wade said. "Margaret

Farben."

"I know," Sam replied, cutting his eyes to the side of the drive-in. "Look at that."

A teenage boy had a young girl, Laurie Conway, backed up against a car, her Levi-clad legs spread wide, the boy between them, hunching, crotch to crotch.

"I believe," Sam said dryly, "if memory serves correctly, we used to call that dry-fucking."

"Sam!" Wade was shocked. He knew his preacher was a maverick—everybody knew that, But not this much a maverick.

"Pardon my bluntness," Sam said. "But what would you call it?"

Wade shook his head. A light, airy sensation had overtaken him at the sight of all this sexual lay. He felt a slight erection begin to grow. He could not clear his head.

"SAM!" he shouted the word.

"Steady, Wade," the minister cautioned him. Fight it. All this is being done for our benefit, It's a stage show, set up by the devil. Fight it!"

Wade closed his eyes, erasing the sight. "He never gives up, does he?"

"No. Are you all right?"

"Be quiet, preacher—I'm trying to pray."

Sam grinned. His friends would all resist; they're strong in their faith.

"Let's try to get through them without trouble," Chester suggested.

But the young people would not let them through. Their profanity was shocking. They shouted things at the men Wade would not have believed had he not been sitting in the truck listening to the verbal garbage.

Chester merely shook his head in disgust.

"Mother fucker!" a boy shouted at them. A young girl, perhaps fifteen at the most, leaned against the truck. She winked at Sam. She also smelled bad. "Want some pussy, preacher?" She opened her shirt, exposing young braless breasts to him.

Sam averted his eyes, looking straight ahead. Suddenly, as if on some hidden cue, the crowd of young people parted. The road was empty, the kids returned to the drive-in. Sam looked behind them. A car, bearing out-of-state plates drove slowly down the road.

"They know," Sam muttered. "I don't know how, but

somehow all of them knew that car didn't belong."

"Sam! Let's stop that car and tell the people about—"

"No!" Sam cut Wade off in midsentence. "Do you want more innocent people to die?"

"No," the editor whispered.

"Then just calm down. I want to see what these kids do after this car passes."

When the out-of-state car had gone, turning onto highway 72, out of town, the kids returned to the road, blocking it as before.

"Interesting," Sam observed. "It's as if they receive a signal. But I don't know how they receive it."

A burly young man, in his late teens, leaned against the truck, blocking any movement. Wade stuck his head out the window. "Roy! Get the hell out of the way!"

The young man looked at him, his face reflecting pure insolence. "Don't get all worked up, Thomas. You don't own the fuckin' road."

Sam's smile was sad and knowing, as was Chester's. Both men said nothing.

"I can't believe this," Wade said, his voice trembly. "I taught his Sunday School class for five years. I don't believe he said that to me." Then he became angry. "I ought to get out of this truck and kick his butt!"

"Let it slide, Wade," Sam said. "Besides, are you sure you *can* kick it?"

The editor grew even angrier. "Look, Sam, I'm forty-one years old. I—"

"Smoke a pipe and two packs of cigarettes a day," Sam cut him off. "And have for years." He watched the young people mill about in the road. "And you don't get enough exercise. Look at that kid—he's hard as a rock."

"You sound as though you might be afraid of him, Sam?" Wade spoke before he thought, and was instantly sorry he did.

Sam glanced at him. Wade realized, then, that he did not know his minister as well as he thought he did. There was no fear in Sam's eyes; just a calmness and a certainty that he could and would cope with any situation that might confront him.

"Sorry I said that, Sam."

"It's all right, Wade. You're under a strain. I understand. No, I'm not afraid of him—I'm not afraid of any living man. I've killed men with guns, knives, grenades—and my bare

hands. I've forgotten more about fighting than most men could even comprehend, much less physically achieve; not that it's anything to brag about. But even if I were not a minister, it would do no good for me to manhandle that young man."

Realization filled Wade's eyes. He nodded. "It's a game, isn't it, Sam? Just a damned game! An evil game between Christianity and Satanism." Several of the young men began to rock the light truck back and forth. They were not attempting to over turn it, just playing a game with the men inside.

"You stood up to the devil," Wade said. "But you knew he wasn't going to kill you, didn't you? Didn't you? He can't kill you, can he, Sam?" The minister shook his head in agreement. "Yeah," Wade said, "that's what I thought. Now I get it. That would bring the wrath of God down on him, and he doesn't want that, does he?"

"The key word is not *yet*; he can't kill me." Sam's words were soft.

"But he got Glen! Why Glen and not you?"

"I can't answer that, Wade."

"Do you feel you've been—Chosen, Sam?"

The truck continued to rock.

The minister met Wade's gaze. "Dubois seems to think so."

"That's not what I asked, Sam."

"Yes, I do. I don't know why He picked me, but yes, I believe He did."

"ALL RIGHT—BREAK THIS UP!!" Jimmy's sharp voice cut a warning through the crowd. "You people get out of here—right now!"

Jimmy stuck his head inside the cab. "Things like this have been going on all over town. For the past two-three hours. But almost no one calls in a complaint."

"No one, Jimmy?" Chester asked. The young people had backed off the road, but were still congregated around the drive-in. The looks they gave the men were of hate. Dark hate.

"Only two people, Mr. Stokes. Mr. Word, and old lady Dornak. Some kids almost scared her to death. This same bunch of kids—some of 'em, anyway. Slipping around her house, howling like animals. When I confronted them and told them to stop, they told me to get fucked!" He glanced at 5am. "Excuse me, sir, but that's what they said. Doctor King came to the Dornak house to look after her. She was pretty

shook up. The same bunch called Tony some pretty rough names. I'm telling you, this is scaring me!"

"Have you tried for outside help?" Wade asked.

"Yes, sir. I've had a call in to the Oberlin County Sheriffs office for more than two hours, now. But I can't get through."

"What were you going to tell them?" Sam asked.

Jimmy smiled, a sad, scared smile. "Nothing. I wanted to see if I could get through. I'm being followed wherever I go. By the men I'm supposed to lead as Chief. Miles told me a few minutes ago that he's being followed. They're not going to let us leave, and we can't call out. We don't have to wait for the roads to be closed, Sam—we're cut off now."

"You wish me to do something?" Nydia asked.

Wilder smiled. "Tonight, Nydia. Kill the old priest."

Her answering smile was full of the evil of a thousand years. "How?" she asked, knowing full well what his reply would be. They had played this game for centuries.

Wilder's eyes were savage. "Why, dear, have a stake driven through his heart, as Balon plans for us."

They chuckled together, the sound a dark blending of Satanic evilness, a cacophony of horror.

"And Balon?" she questioned. "When may I have him?"

Wilder turned his old but ever-young eyes upon her. "Do you really feel you can seduce this man of God?"

"When the time is right, yes. Have I ever failed?"

"Two centuries ago, I recall. In Plzen, I believe it was. That young student—"

"Bah! You tricked me that night. That was your doing, Black."

And the devil's agent roared with laughter. "Yes, well, be that as it may." His smile vanished. "Perhaps you can seduce this man, Nydia, but it will not be easy. It may have to be done with coercion. You must be patient."

"He is but a mortal man," the witch scoffed. "And I can do tricks with my body mortal women can only dream of doing."

Wilder shook his head. "Mortal, yes, Nydia, but—" he hesitated, his dark eyes seeking something in the distance. "Balon worries me. He isn't afraid. He has *no* fear."

She was not convinced. "I will have him, and then he will die like any mortal."

"Perhaps," Wilder said. "Perhaps. But at what price?"

"What's all that?" Wade asked, looking at the bottles and jars Sam had carried in. He had been to the rectory, picking up Father Dubois and what Dubois had waiting for him.

"Holy Water," the old priest said. "And you'll need every drop of it. Now I must return to the church."

"Wait!" Tony said. "What do we do, Father?"

"Fight. All of you. Follow Sam's direction. His way will be pointed out, with God's help." He turned to leave.

"Where are you going, Michael?" Sam asked. The priest looked at him, a very faint smile on his lips. "Home."

"I'll drive you," Sam said, not yet catching the subtle meaning of Dubois's words. "No." Dubois stopped him with a wave of his hand. "I want to walk. I want to smell the flowers, the grass, look at the trees. I want to feel the sun on my face."

Sam felt horror fill him as the full impact of Dubois's words hit him. The old priest was going to die—and he knew it.

Dubois cautioned Sam with a quick glance. A quick brushing of the eyes that said: Don't alarm the others. Rally them. It's all up to you.

"We'll see you tomorrow, Father, Tony said.

"Yes," the priest said. "Tomorrow."

Dubois walked back to the rectory, slowly, enjoying the sights and smells of nature in full bloom. He showered, changed into clean clothes, then sat down in his favorite chair in the small living room, reading his Bible. Each time the clock would chime the hour and half hour, he would look up.

He waited.

Dubois read his Bible, savoring each familiar word, occasionally nodding his head in agreement, sometimes saying aloud, "Yes, yes."

He read for hours, the clock ticking, chiming. At full dark, a "bird flew against his window, smashing the glass, killing itself, dying with a horrible screech.

Dubois raised his head. "So you've finally come," he whispered. "Well, come on."

"So you wish to play games with me, eh?" he said. "Very well, then listen to this." He began to read aloud. "*Yea, though I walk the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil—*"

A hissing drifted through the house, reaching Dubois's ears. An evil hissing came from his back door. A thin scratching sound as the door was pushed open. A shuffling sound as feet dragged across the tile.

"Ah," Dubois smiled. "You don't like that, eh? Well, listen to this: *The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*"

"Die!" the one word was spoken from out of darkness.

"The Lord is the strength of my life, Dubois read to the darkness facing him, *"of whom shall I be afraid?"*

"Die!" the voice spoke.

"But I will die only once," the priest said, "You are the living dead."

The voice laughed insanely; a voice Dubois knew. He strained to place the tones. No! It couldn't be. But he knew it was. "That is true," the voice said. *"The Lord is my strength and my shield,"* Dubois said, a small finger of fear touching him. You're only going home, he reminded himself. And the hollow, evil voice laughed at the words. *"I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in Him I will trust."* The lamp beside the priest suddenly shattered, plunging the room into semidarkness, the only light a small night light in the hall.

"Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night . . ."

John Benton stepped into the room, his dark burial suit rumpled, white shirt dirty from the grave.

Dubois rose in shock. "Get away!" He held a cross up to the figure.

Benton shuffled across the room, his pale, bloodless face shining in the dim light. A hideous face, with staring, unblinking eyes. "Do not forsake me now, my God," Dubois prayed.

Benton raised a stake, shuffling closer. The cross Dubois held had no effect on the living dead. The priest backed away, back, until he bumped against the wall. His heart was pounding in his chest.

Dubois reached for a vial of Holy Water on the table by his chair. His shaking hands knocking the vial to the floor, the glass shattering on the tile.

Benton came closer, his walk a staggering, awkward gait. His smile was hideous.

"John!" Dubois cried. "John Benton—can't you hear me? Don't you know me?"

"I know you," the living dead spoke. He raised the stake.

The last sound Father Michael Dubois heard was his own praying as the stake plunged into his chest.

Sam banged on the front door of the rectory, growing more frustrated with each knock. He walked around to the rear. The back door was open, early morning sunlight streaming into the kitchen, the light picking up the faint dusty track footprints on the tile floor. Sam cautiously stepped inside. The dirty footprints led to Father Dubois's living room. The smell of death hung in the small room. Something else, too. Something Sam could not quite identify. Then he had it: it was a musty odor. But more than that, it was a smell of something he had smelled many times in Korea: graves that had been disturbed. But why would that smell be in Michael's house? Unless—?

Sam stepped around the footprints in the kitchen and walked into the living room, knowing what he would find. He was not shocked to discover Dubois dead on the floor. The old priest had known it was coming—somehow. Sam stood for a long silent moment, looking down at the body of his friend. The priest lay sprawled on the floor, his face twisted in horrible pain, eyes wide and staring. At nothing. A long stake protruded from his chest. The room stank of blood.

And that musty smell.

Sam spoke a silent prayer for Dubois, then picked up the phone and gave the operator the number of the City Police, knowing everything he said would be monitored.

"Jimmy? Get over to the rectory as quickly as possible. Father Dubois is dead."

He then called Tony, telling him what had happened. The doctor said he'd be right over.

The operator laughed.

Sam sat down in a chair, waiting. He had to force himself to remember that the grotesque thing on the floor was merely an empty shell; Dubois was not in this room. He was home with his God—home, at last.

"You fought a good fight, friend," Sam whispered. "Now rest forever in the arms of God."

"Sam?" Jimmy's voice echoed through the home.

"In here, Jimmy. Watch those footprints on the floor."

"I see them." He got his first look at Dubois and gagged for a moment, before control took over.

The body of Dubois seemed to sigh in death as gas escaped him.

Tony walked in. He looked at Dubois, crossed himself, then knelt down by the body. "Dead about ten or twelve hours, I'd guess. Give or take a couple of hours."

"What is that smell?" Jimmy asked. "Not the blood—the other one."

"The Undead," Sam said.

Eyes swung toward him; disbelieving eyes. Eyes mirroring dread and horror. Jimmy stuttered, "The—the Undead, Sam?"

"How many graves have been broken into the past two months, Jimmy?"

"Couple of dozen, I guess. Maybe more." The realization of what the minister was saying struck a hammer blow. "You mean—?"

"Yes."

"But why would they do this?" Tony pointed to the remains of Dubois. "Like this!?"

"Because they were ordered to do it." Sam rose from his chair and got a blanket from the closet. He pulled the stake from Dubois's chest, grunting with the effort. He tossed the bloody piece of wood to one side then covered the priest with the blanket.

"What do we do with him?" Tony asked.

"We can't take him to Glower's; he's one of Them. I won't have Michael's body defiled. I'll take care of it myself."

"I'll help you," Tony volunteered.

"How many city cops can you trust, Jimmy?"

"None. They're all wearing medallions."

"Watch your back, boy," Sam warned him.

"Yes, sir," the young acting-Chief said. "I'll swing by and take a look at Chester's and Miles'." He left, walking slowly out the back door, his shoulders hunched, as if expecting a blow from behind.

Tony looked at the blanket-covered body of Father Dubois. "What do we do with him, Sam? Where can we bury him where They won't find him?"

"We don't bury him," Sam said. "We burn him."

Black smoke spiralled upward from the makeshift funeral pyre at the city dump. The gas-soaked wood upon which Dubois lay burst into flames. In minutes, the priest was gone.

The doctor shuddered in the heat of the Nebraska morning and the flames from the dying pyre. "What an ignoble way

for a good man to have to go," he bitterly observed, then looked at Sam. "I'm scared, Sam."

"So am I, Tony. So am I."

But the doctor looked at the preacher and thought: No, you're not, preacher. I believe you're looking forward to this fight.

Sam met his gaze. "Go on home, Tony. Get your gear together. Boots, canteens, blankets, guns—the whole bit."

He nodded his agreement. "Miles and Doris have asked me to stay with them."

"That's good. Everything pops day after tomorrow."

"And—?"

"We win or we lose. And God have mercy on us if we lose."

After dropping Tony off at his car at the rectory, Sam drove the streets of town. Very few stores were open. No one walked the streets except young people. They were brazen, rude, and profane.

Then he saw Jane Ann walking on the sidewalk, followed by several young men.

Sam gunned the pickup, reaching her a moment before the young men. They were hulking, sneering, and half drunk. Sam threw open the door on the passenger side. "Get in here!" he snapped. "Have you lost your mind, Janey?"

She slid in beside him, fear on her face.

"Hey, preacher!" a young punk called. "You gonna get you some of that pussy?"

A deadly calm overcame the minister; a killing mood crept into his brain. He got out of the truck, walked up to the young man, and hit him, a low, vicious right to the stomach, about one inch above the belt buckle. When the punk doubled up in agony, Sam savagely brought his right knee up into the young man's face. There was grim satisfaction on Sam's face as he heard teeth shatter and the jaw break under the impact. The punk dropped to the sidewalk, his face ruined. Sam resisted an impulse to kick him in the balls; to finish him as he had been taught to do. Brutally, he shoved the other punks out of his way, sending one sprawling into the gutter, hoping they would try to start something with him.

They did not.

I have to remember, he thought, that I am a minister.

It seemed to Sam he was reminding himself of that fact more and more each day.

"I'm sorry, Sam," Jane Ann said, as he pulled away from the

curb and the drunken, once profane, and now silent and stunned young men. "I just wanted to get out of the house. I didn't know it would be this bad." She looked at Sam in a different light, now, after having witnessed another side of the man. She loved him even more.

He told her about Father Dubois. Tears sprang into her eyes, multicoloring the violet.

"And we can't run?" she asked.

"No." He glanced at her. "All right—let me show you."

They spent the next hour driving about that section of Fork, attempting to get out. It was useless; impossible, as Sam had told them all it would be. He could feel her fear growing. This section of Fork—thousands of square miles, dotted with more than two hundred small lakes—was sealed off tight.

"A wreck is blocking the road just ahead," sheriff's deputies told them, smiling as they spoke, their eyes dead.

"A bridge is being worked on," a highway patrolman informed him, smiling as he lied.

"This county road is closed temporarily," a highway department worker told them.

"The dam at Cottonwood Creek is leaking," a game and fishery man told them. "Sorry, but you can't get through."

"Too bad," a cowboy said, his eyes drifting down to Jane Ann's crotch, outlined through her jeans. He licked his lips. He stopped his tongue-play when his eyes lifted to meet Sam's cold stare.

"This range is closed to traffic."

"Why?" Jane Ann challenged.

"Just carry your little ass on, lady!"

Sam's was the only civilian vehicle on any road they drove.

As they drove, Sam could sense Jane Ann was on the ragged side of hysteria. "Settle down," he told her. "Just accept the facts and prepare yourself for the fight ahead of us."

"I am frightened," she admitted. "It was, I don't know—kind of a game, I guess, up to now. Now I'm really scared."

"We're going to make it, Janey. You have to believe that."

"I do believe it, when I'm with you." When he not reply, she said, "You're the first minister I've ever seen with a tattoo. Why a rose, Sam?"

He chuckled. "I was sixteen years old and drunk. I'd just run away from a foster home. Made it to California and was working part-time in L. A. I passed a tattoo shop one night,

saw a picture of this in the window, liked it, and went in.

She touched the red rose on his thick forearm, fingers cool on his skin. She rubbed the outline of the petals. "Sam?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Michelle is gone."

"Believe me, I know."

"Why don't you stop the truck, Sam? Right up there by that grove of trees."

He slowed, then braked, pulling off the dirt road, knowing it was wrong, knowing what was coming, but unable to help himself. Truthfully, he did not want to help himself, he admitted. He cut the engine and they sat for a time in silence.

"There is a little creek over there," she pointed across a small field to a clump of trees. "I used to play there as a child. It's very lovely, very peaceful."

"Jane Ann—"

"All that junk in the back, Sam—do you have a blanket back there?"

"Jane Ann—"

"Never mind. I'll see for myself." She got out of the cab and rummaged around the gear until she found a blanket. She tossed it in the cab, beside him.

Sam looked at the blanket, a woeful look in his eyes. "Jane Ann, I—"

"Now, you listen to me, Sam Balon." She stood outside the truck, her eyes locked with his. "I'm tired of dillydallying around this. I don't know how much time we have, so I'm going to have to take the lead in this thing. I love you, Sam. There! I've said it. I—Love—You," she carefully enunciated each word. "And I know, beyond any doubt, that you love me." She walked around the truck and opened the door to the driver's side. "So get the blanket and come on."

There was an aching in his groin, and his heart was pounding like a kid on his first date, but he got the blanket and followed her. He was not so love-struck that he forgot his .45, however, or extra clips.

As they walked across the small field, Sam kept reminding himself: You're a minister, Sam. This is wrong!

But he kept walking.

They walked in silence to the creek and the of the trees.

It was peaceful, he thought, as Jane Ann took the blanket from him, tugging it away from his grasp. "Sam! Turn loose!"

She spread the blanket on the cool earth beside the tiny creek. She bent over, smoothing out the blanket, and her

jeans stretched tight across her rump.

Sam felt as though there was a walnut lodged in throat. Sweat beaded his forehead. He shut his eyes and gritted his teeth, his fists balled hard.

"Open your eyes, Sam," Jane Ann said. "For heaven's sake! I'm not going to rape you." She giggled. "However, that is a thought."

She sat down on the blanket, drawing her knees under her chin, arms locked around her shins. "Sit down, Sam. Make yourself comfortable. We're going to be here for a while."

The minister mumbled something under his breath. He felt as though he were fourteen again, looking for the first time at a naked woman. He remembered that moment very well. An older woman—all of eighteen, and the sister of a friend—had asked Sam if he'd like to take a walk in the woods. Sam's life had never been the same after that hour in the bushes with—what was her name? He couldn't remember.

Standing by the creek, looking down at Jane Ann, Sam felt like a fool. He also felt like gathering her up in his arms and climbing a tree with her—among other things. He wondered what his father would have done in this situation?

"My boy," his father had told him, just a few months before his death, "the flesh is very weak. Remember that."

"What does that mean?" Sam asked.

"It means, Sam, keep it in your pants if at all possible. You're a big, good-looking boy, and you're going to be a handsome man. I've seen the way you look at girls," he smiled. "And the way the girls look at you." He sighed. "I suppose you come by it naturally, though. I was not exactly pure at heart as a young man."

Two weeks later, Sam was caught in the back seat of his father's car with a cheerleader—an elder's daughter. And they were not studying the Bible lesson for Sunday School. The elder left Sam's father's church in a huff, the daughter was sent away to school, and Sam got a licking he still remembered.

Smiling in remembrance, Sam sat down on the blanket beside Jane Ann; a respectful distance from her. She laughed at him. It was the first time he'd heard her laugh in days.

"Sam?" she touched his arm. "There is no guarantee we'll come out of this alive, is there?"

"No," he said gently, thinking: You might, but I won't.

"Then, why don't they just come on and do whatever it is they plan to do?"

"The time is not right, Janey. Besides, it's a game to them."

She was silent for a time, staring at the tiny in front of them. A bird sang in the tree above them. Not a bird indigenous to this area, but neither of them noticed.

"Do you love me, Sam?"

"Yes," he spoke softly, and felt a great weight lifted from him. His heart was light. "Yes, I do. I think I have for a long time."

He thought of Father Dubois's statement, that they must produce a son. Again, he wondered why Dubois had said it.

Jane Ann lay back on the blanket. Sam forced himself to look straight ahead, knowing that if he looked at her, all his principles, all his morals, and his hard put-upon noble thoughts were going to go flying away.

Peripheral vision saw her unbuttoning her shirt. Damn! he swore. Forgive me, Lord.

"Sam?" she whispered.

"It's not right, Janey." His eyes were fixed straight ahead. I should get up and walk away, he told himself. But he remained on the blanket.

"It isn't wrong, either, Sam."

"How can you say that?" he swung his head and knew he'd made a big mistake.

She lay on the blanket, her shirt unbuttoned to the waist, the shirttails pulled out. She wore no bra.

Oh, Lord! Sam silently groaned, his heart thumping, his throat dry, and his groin aching.

The "Song of Solomon" rushed into his head. *The two breasts are like two young roses that are twins, which feed among the lilies.*

"I can say it because it's true, Sam. Your marriage to Michelle was unHoly, and you know that, now. She's gone—really, she never was. And we might be all out of time." She tugged at his arm and he slipped down beside her.

Forgive me, Lord, he silently spoke to Him.

"I love you, Sam," she whispered, her lips wet. "And I want you." She pulled his head to her breast, and his mouth found the nipple, his big hand resting on her bare stomach.

Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor: the belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies.

Her hand fumbled with his belt buckle as his mouth found hers. "Take off your gun belt, Sam," she said. "I'm really not that dangerous."

Pistol on the ground beside them, she touched him, and his

heart pounded.

They were naked in the shade of the cotton-woods, and the tiny creek murmured words of love, the babbling mingled with their words.

Above them, the bird sang a curious song.

"Sam!" she cried out as he entered her.

Her bare leg rested on his thigh, her dampness pressing against his hip. Her face was pushed against his shoulder. Breathing had softened, evened, slowed.

"What we did was a sin, Janey."

"I remember you saying our God is a forgiving God."

"If we ask for it, and, I believe, if we mean it when we do."

"Well, there is one way we can get back in His favor," she smiled against his skin.

"I'd like to know how," he replied glumly.

"You're a minister, aren't you?"

He raised up on one elbow. "Of course, I am!"

"Well—marry us, then."

He blinked. "Here? Now? Janey, that's crazy!"

"Why? You love me, don't you?"

"Y7es. I—ah—uh—told you that about two dozen times a—uh—few minutes ago."

"There is no other minister around to do the job, is there? In Fork; this part of Fork, I mean?"

"That's right."

"We can't get out to find one to marry us, can we?"

"Uh—no."

"Then we're like Adam and Eve, aren't we?"

"Janey! Not quite."

She grinned. "Keep it simple, Sam. Something of Genesis, perhaps."

"Genesis?" He thought for a moment, then smiled. "All right." He quoted from chapter two, verses 23 and 25.

"I think that is very appropriate," she touched his face.

"When you consider the circumstances."

And they were not ashamed.

"You and Jane Ann did WHAT?" Chester shouted.

"Oh, I think that's wonderful," Doris said.

"But, Sam?" Wade had a perplexed look on his face. "Who married you?"

"I did," Sam said.

"But—but—" Chester stuttered.

"Be quiet, dear," Faye shushed him. "I think it's wonderful."

"I think it's against the law!" Doctor King frowned.

"What law?" Jane Ann put an end to that line of reasoning.

"Where?"

No one had anything to say about that, since God mentioned nothing about blood tests, licenses, or waiting periods when He laid down His rules.

"It was really a very simple ceremony," Jane Ann smiled.

"It must have been," Doris observed. "There are still a few blades of grass in your hair. Not to mention a twig or two," she added dryly.

"A bird sang—uh—above us," Jane Ann blushed.

"Basic accoutrements for any marriage," Miles smiled, stepping forward to shake Sam's hand. "Congratulations, friend."

"I'll gather my things," Jane Ann said. "I want us to go home."

Sam sobered. "We've got about thirty-six hours before—it all breaks loose." He glanced at Chester. "Have you got everything ready to go?"

"Everything is done, Sam. While you and Janey were—ah," he smiled, "getting married, I stripped the store."

"Strip is a good choice of words," Doris smiled, picking another blade of grass out of Jane Ann's hair.

Miles frowned; Faye giggled; Wade shook his head; and Sam turned red in the face. "We've got provisions for a full ten days," Chester continued, "and extra gas is stored around this part of Fork; just about anywhere you want to look. That's no problem."

Sam looked at Wade. "You and Anita staying here tonight?"

"We thought it best."

"Tony? You're staying with Miles and Doris?" The doctor nodded.

"Jimmy said Peter could move in with him. All right," Sam looked around. "When you go home tonight, lock all your windows and doors. Pull the drapes. Keep as much religious paraphernalia in sight as possible. Place open Bibles around the house. Each of you take some Holy Water, and wear your crosses."

"That didn't help Father Dubois or Father Haskell," Chester pointed out.

"No," Sam admitted, "It didn't. And I don't know why. But I, for one, am not going to take chances."

As Sam and Jane Ann stood on the front porch at Chester's, Jimmy pulled into the drive. After he recovered from his shock of their marriage, he said, "It's strange—no one is moving in town. A few young people, that's all." He looked at Sam and Jane Ann. "Who married you?"

"I did," Sam answered.

The young cop frowned, smiled, then nodded, keeping his many questions to himself.

"Are the kids still drinking?" Sam asked.

"Drunk, you mean! I stopped picking them up about an hour ago. If I put them in the lockup, my own men would turn them loose. If I took them home, their parents would laugh at me. Then Addison told me to leave them alone; said they weren't hurting anyone or anything. Sam, I can't get through to the Highway Patrol; can't get through to any law enforcement agency, anywhere. We're cut off—stuck! I'm going to turn in my badge, just as soon as I figure out who to turn it in to. I can't enforce the law—what's the use of wearing it?"

Sam thought of Jimmy's girl. "Have you seen Judy lately?"

The young man's smile was sad and bitter. "Oh, yes, Sam. Saw her this morning. Just before she checked into the hotel with David Vanderwerf, Paul Smiley, and George Deschin. I understand they had quite a party." He spat on the ground. "She took them all on—so I'm told."

Wade had stepped out on the porch, listening. "You think it's wise to turn in your badge?"

"I don't think it makes any difference," Sam answered for Jimmy. "In a matter of hours we're all going to be participants in the biggest blood bath to ever hit this state. A badge is not going to make any difference, one way or the other."

Jimmy shuddered as he thought of what lay before them. Wade's face was pale. Sam was totally calm. Jimmy removed the badge from his shirt. "I'll go get Peter. We'll get our gear together."

"Try to stay calm, Jimmy," Sam urged him.

Jane Ann stood in the doorway of Michelle's room, her lips pursed in disgust. She shook her head at the filth. "I've never seen anything like his. What are you going to do with all this?"

"Leave it. We don't have that many hours to spend in this house. Why bother with it?"

She walked to the painting, staring at it. "It's evil!" Picking up a long fingernail file from the dresser, she ripped the painting to shreds, hacking at it until it was no longer recognizable.

Marching to the kitchen, Jane Ann found a large bag and stuffed Michelle's Satanic possessions into it, along with what was left of the picture. She carried the bulging bag out to the back yard, dumping it into the garbage can.

Neighbors watched from their windows, their eyes wild with hate.

Sam had watched her with mild amusement. When she returned, he asked, "You feel better, now?"

"Some," she returned the smile. Her smile faded as she looked outside. The sunlight was beginning to wane. Night was slowly creeping upon the town.

She walked to him, putting her arms around him, pressing close to him. "Tell me everything will be all right."

He stroked her hair. "I wish I could," he replied honestly. "But I'm afraid I'd be telling you a lie."

Night fell heavily on the prairie town, shadowing the lighted streets, deepening the gloom of alleys and back yards, bringing with the darkness an almost tangible aura of evil. The streets were murky. Red-rimmed eyes looked out from dark windows, heavy breathing could be heard. An occasional snarl ripped from once-human throats, and savagery began to stalk the town.

At full dark, a gang of drunken teenagers smashed the back door of a drug store and helped themselves to a selection of narcotics, washing down the highs and lows with raw whiskey. Patrolman Vickers of the Whitfield Police Department watched them stagger down the street. He chuckled as he touched the medallion around his neck, then laughed and drove away into the night.

Fifteen minutes later, he sat in his patrol car and watched an elderly woman walk her dog. Vickers took his .38 from his holster, took careful aim, and shot the old woman in the head. The slug tore through her brain, blowing away part of her face. She sprawled in a front yard. The dog ran away into the night, barking its joy at being set free.

Vickers laughed wickedly and drove away.

He did not see the huge Beast shuffle out of the darkness, dragging the old woman into the shadows, where others of his kind waited, lips wet with drool. Their teeth flashed a

dull, slick yellow as they feasted on the still-warm flesh.

Ruth Cash heard something prowling in her back yard. Fear made her heart pound in her chest. Those teenagers were back. They circled her house, calling out from the night, telling her what they were going to do to her. She had called the police and the sheriff's department, but no one came to help her. Now her phone wasn't working.

An attractive woman of forty, a widow for ten years, Ruth stepped out on the back porch. "You boys better get away from here!" she yelled. "I'll call your parents!"

They laughed at her from the darkness, and the taunting, jeering chilled her as they shouted filth at her.

"You're all dirty!" she screamed. "I'm going to call the police." She began to weep. "Dear God," she whispered, calling on Him for the first time in years. "What is happening in this town?"

She backed away, off the porch, into the kitchen.

"Help me. Please help me."

The young men came at her, knocking her down, dragging her into the living room. They stripped her, spread her legs, pinning her to the floor. Ruth watched as one young man removed his jeans, exposing himself, his hardness leaping free.

"What is she?" a teenager asked. "How come she ain't one of us or Them?"

"She ain't nothing," was the reply.

Then they raped her.

They took turns with her, in all positions. Ruth screamed her pain and outrage as they sodomized her. But no one came to help her. They beat her, forcing her to engage in oral sex with them.

And the night wore on, painfully. Ruth lay sobbing on the carpet, bruised, aching, and humiliated.

"Reckon she can still breed?" she heard a young man ask.

"I don't see why not," another replied. "We'll take her to Them."

Hours later, Ruth's sanity had left her, as had her former shape. Mercifully, she had fainted when the young men had dumped her over the fence at Tyson's Lake—and she got her first glimpse of the Beasts. She had regained consciousness to find herself on her knees, a Beast mating with her, his organ driving deep inside her, his fangs biting her on the neck.

She now squatted deep inside the earth. Her body was covered with coarse, thick hair. She mumbled and snarled

and growled, and the others seemed to understand her, and she them. She had no recollection of her former life. No remembrance of the God she had once loved, then had forsaken after her husband died, for a belief in nothing. Dimly, as a female Beast, she understood she was going to breed new life in a few months. There were several young Beasts crawling around on the earth floor of the cave. And Ruth was happy.

"I don't like it," the young woman said, "Honey, we haven't seen one person in over an hour. No one. It's spooky!" she moved closer to her husband, placing a hand on his leg.

They had been married less than a week. It was their honeymoon.

"Aw, don't be scared," he tried to reassure her. "Besides, this is the only road for miles. We'd have to go a hundred miles out of our way to get to the main highway if we didn't take this country road through—what is the name of this county? Fork. Sure is a big county."

"Okay," she sighed, looking around, making certain all the doors were locked. "But I don't like it—just remember that."

"Yes, dear," he smiled.

Ten minutes later, a patrol car pulled them over, its flashing lights turning the highway red.

"You were speeding," she told her husband in an accusing voice.

"Get out of the car!" the deputy told them.

"Me, too?" the young bride asked.

"You, too."

Outside their car, headlights and flashing red lights almost blinding them, the young couple did not see the men rush them until it was too late. The young husband was beaten into unconsciousness with saps, then shot through the head at close range, his brains splattering on the blacktop as his head bounced from the impact of heavy slugs.

The woman screamed herself into hysteria as the possessed lawmen ripped off her clothing, forcing her to stand naked in the glare of the headlights.

"Look at them tits," one laughed, pinching her nipples, rigid from cold and fear.

They raped her and tossed her into the caged back seat, with her dead husband.

They drove to Tyson's Lake.

And the Beasts were pleased this night. Two fresh females,

both of them breeders, in one night. The Beasts feasted on the dead newlywed, and then the leader mounted the bride.

The young woman screamed her fear and revulsion as the Beast mounted her. In moments, though, she began to moan and snarl, her body beginning the rapid transformation from human to Beast.

After a time, she sat on the rocky floor of the cave with what had once been Ruth Cash, speaking in a language of mumbles and snarls and guttural lashings.

And they were content.

SEVENTEEN

Neither Sam nor Jane Ann wished to sleep in either of the parsonage's two bedrooms, for evil seemed to hang in the rooms, and the foul odor to the carpets and drapes. Jane Ann made the couch in the living room—which Sam learned folded out into a bed—and they slept there.

After making love, they slept fitfully for a few hours. But the night sounds of Whitfield soon awoke them. Sam was jarred out of a restless sleep, shaken into awareness by a scream.

"What was that?" Jane Ann sat up in the bed, eyes wide with fear.

"I don't know," Sam said, pulling on his jeans boots. "But I don't think we'd better count on much more sleep this night."

Before Sam could slip into his shirt, Jane Ann's screaming spun him around. She pointed to a side window of the living room. The face of Max Steiner stared at them through the glass, his eyes dead-like, red-rimmed. Drool dripped from his lips.

Sam grabbed his .45, jerked open the front door, and recoiled in horror as he ran into Paul Barlow. Recovering, Sam pushed the man off his porch, sending him sprawling on the ground.

"What the hell are you doing on my porch at one o'clock in the morning?" Sam shouted at him. Sam backed away from the steps as Barlow slithered up the walkway, up the steps, crawling as a snake, hissing sounds coming from his lips, his mouth pulled back in a snarl, exposing his teeth.

Sam kicked him in the face, his boot catching his once friendly neighbor on the nose, sending blood spurting. Barlow fell to the sidewalk, crouching there, hissing and snarling at Sam.

Sam raised the .45, jacking back the hammer, his finger tightening on the trigger. "I'll kill you!" he warned, then watched as Barlow slithered off the steps, on all fours, working his way into the night, making terrible hissing noises as he crawled.

"God!" Sam's flesh felt creepy.

"SAM!" Jane Ann screamed. "They're coming in the back door."

The minister spun, running through the house, through the living room, dining room, into the kitchen. The back door was splintering under the crush of men gathering on the porch.

Sam lifted the .45 and pulled the trigger half a dozen times, the slugs tearing huge holes in the wood. He shouted to Jane Ann, "Get your shotgun—watch the front." He knew Jane Ann would not hesitate to use the 12 gauge.

There was screaming in the darkness around the back door, as the men—or whatever they were—ran away, dragging several of the dead or wounded with them. The snarling and howling of the possessed filled the night.

Jane Ann's shotgun boomed three times, shattering the momentary quiet. A screaming followed the discharges, then the thud of a body lifted off its feet and slamming to the ground. Moaning.

Sam switched on the outside lights, front and back. A body lay crumpled in the back yard, a bullet hole in the man's head, the head swelled from the impact of the heavy .45 slug. Sam ran through the house, to the front door. A man lay writhing on the sidewalk, both hands holding his stomach, his blood pouring out through his fingers. The shotgun, slug-loaded, had hit him three times in the chest and belly. The man shivered, drummed his heels on the sidewalk, and died.

Jane Ann's face was pale, but she grimly shoved shells into the shotgun, ready for another onslaught if need be. They both heard the sounds of sirens in the distance.

Sam shoved the .45 behind his belt, and strode to the hall closet, jerking open the door, reaching inside for the Thompson SMG. He slapped a clip in the belly and worked the bolt, chambering a round.

"Sam? That's a machine gun!" Jane Ann said.

"It sure is. And I'll bet you that's Addison coming here. He'll try to arrest me—or us. But I've got news for him: he's not going to do it."

Addison ran up the steps of the parsonage, stepped into the living room, then stopped cold in his tracks when he saw the Thompson in Sam's hands. The muzzle lifted to the sheriff's belly and Addison's gut sucked inward.

"Stand in the hall and watch my back," Sam told Jane Ann. "If anything—I mean *anything*—moves, shoot it."

"Now, you wait just a minute," Addison said, authority overcoming fright.

"Shut your damned mouth!" Sam barked at him. "I figured

it all out, Addison. Me, and several others in this town. We know how it was done, and why. But it didn't work with us."

"I don't know what you're talking . . ."

"Shut up, you son-of-a-bitch!" Sam raged. He was in no mood to act the preacher part. "I know all about the roads being closed. I know all about your Black Masses, and I know about Doctor Black Wilder—where he came from, what he is, and what he's doing here. I don't know why your . . . possessed jumped the gun and started this night; you weren't supposed to start this soon, and I imagine Wilder is furious with some of you. You spoiled his little game."

"You're under arrest for murder, Balon!"

Sam laughed at him, enjoying immensely the flush that spread over the man's face. "You want to try to take me in, Walter. Come on."

"My dear man," a voice spoke from the front porch. An educated voice. "My, my, we did make a mistake with you, didn't we?"

Black Wilder stepped into the room. He was immaculately dressed in dark suit, very white shirt, dark tie with a small knot, polished shoes. A medallion hung about his neck. He smiled at Sam, then cut his eyes to Walter. "You may leave now," he said. "And drag those bodies away from this house. They offend me. You know where to take them." His voice sharpened. "Get out!"

Addison hung his head in obedience, his eyes fearful. "Yes, Master." He left the room.

"According to the book," Sam spoke over his shoulder to Jane Ann, "there will be a woman with him. A dark-haired woman—a witch, Nydia. If you see her, shoot her."

Wilder laughed. "Oh, no, no, my good man. My, you certainly are a violent one, aren't you? Old Testament type. I can see why your God chose you." He chuckled. "I can assure you, sir, more violence this night will not be necessary. Let me call Nydia in—please?"

Sam hesitated, then nodded, his finger on the trigger of the SMG. "Nydia?" Wilder called. "Do come in. And do very carefully. The young lady here," his dark eyes swept Jane Ann's body, and his eyes filled with lust, "has a most awesome-looking shotgun. And she knows how to use it. In your present form, at least on this night, you are susceptible to scarring, and I know how you prize your beauty. You do remember that musket ball in France?"

"Why are you telling us this?" Sam asked. "Aren't you afraid

we'll hurt her—or kill her?"

Wilder laughed. "No," he shook his head. "You could hurt her, slightly, but you could not kill her. Or me." His eyes took in the shotgun and Sam's SMG. "At least not with those weapons, sir."

The woman dressed in black walked stately into the room. She was perhaps the most beautiful woman Sam had ever seen. High, very full breasts, the pale cleavage exposed in her V-neck gown, the V just touching the darker area of nipple. Her hair was the blackest, matching her eyes. Her lips were full and red and moist.

"The V stands for virgin, I'm sure," Jane Ann said sarcastically.

Nydia's lips pulled back in a faint smile. "Only slightly amusing, dear." Her eyes touched Sam, taking in his heavy musculature, shirtless. Her eyes drifted to his crotch, and she licked her lips. "I don't suppose you'd allow me the pleasure of kissing you hello?" she smiled.

"You've got to be kidding!"

She laughed, exposing dazzling white teeth. "I guessed as much." She glanced at Jane Ann. "You spoiled my plans, dear. I wanted so very much to be the one to seduce your new husband."

Startled, Jane Ann asked, "How did you know we were married?"

"I watched him make love to you yesterday afternoon, in the cottonwoods by that quaint little creek. Your technique is lacking, dear. There is more to making love than just having the man stick it in and grunt."

"Crude bitch!" Wilder muttered. "Absolutely no class or breeding."

"The bird that sang above us," Sam remembered. "I didn't recognize the call."

"My, aren't you the observant one?" Nydia smiled.

"Mr. Balon," Wilder said, "why don't you give up this fight? You can't win; surely you see that?"

"I don't see any such thing."

"Mr. Balon—you don't like being called Reverend, do you? Mr. Balon," Wilder pressed him. "let's be civilized men about this upcoming confrontation. In this area of Fork County, we have over two thousand—two thousand, sir—men, women, and children who have pledged their hearts and souls to my Master. What do you have? Nine-ten people. Eleven, counting yourself. Those are impossible odds, sir.

"You forgot one, Wilder."

"Oh? Who, might I ask?"

"God."

"Well! Where is He, sir?" Wilder smiled. "Is He massing great armies to come to your assistance? No, I think not, sir. You're quite alone with your faith." He laughed.

"You and your pitiful handful and a silly Jew who doesn't even believe in my Master."

"All Miles needs—and has—is the belief in a power greater than he. That's enough."

"You're defending his faith?"

"Why not?"

Wilder sighed. "You're a strange man, Mr. Balon. But, be that as it may, I still maintain you are alone in your fight. May I be seated, sir? Please—we have much to discuss and I see no reason why we can't be comfortable while doing so. Perhaps you would care to put on a shirt, sir. I'm afraid if you don't, Nydia is quite apt to start drooling down the front of her dress."

The witch laughed at him.

Sam had to smile at the ludicrousness of the situation. He nodded, then slipped into a shirt. The men sat. Wilder on the couch, Sam in his easy chair.

"Nydia?" Wilder said. "Why don't you and—" he smiled "Mrs. Balon go into the kitchen and prepare some refreshments? Some coffee, or tea, if you will." He glanced at Sam. "I'm suggesting they both go so you won't think I'm attempting to poison or drug you. I assure you, sir, that is not my style."

"You will not need that weapon, Jane Ann," Nydia said. "I will not attempt to harm you—either of you—without his permission," she glanced at Wilder. "And he has said we make no moves until twelve-oh-one a.m. Thursday. For whatever it means to either of you, you have our word on that. There are rules we must follow. Sam is, I believe, quite aware of them."

"Sam?" Jane Ann spoke the one word question.

"Go on, honey. For now, I believe them. It's still a game to them. They're going to try to convert us. Besides, they would rather not lose any members of their Coven by my hand."

"Exactly, sir," Wilder smiled, adjusting the crease in his trousers, flicking away an imaginary spot of dust from his suit coat. "And those who, as you put it, 'jumped the gun,' this evening, will be punished for doing so. Believe that, sir."

The men sat in silence for a few minutes, while women

puttered around in the kitchen, speaking in low tones. Sam was amused, thinking that even among the hierarchy of Hell, women were still, at times, relegated to the kitchen.

When the women returned, Jane Ann's face was pale and angry. She sat down on the arm of Sam's chair. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nydia failed the first assignment," Wilder said. "Aside from being crude and vulgar, she is also tactless."

Sam's look was puzzled until Jane Ann explained. "She told me all about the . . . pleasures of their worship. She went into great detail. It seems, so she says, that if we join them, we can live forever. Wilder can assure us of that; our God cannot, according to her. She told me a great deal about . . . sex. Without limits, if you know what I mean. She was disgusting!"

Nydia laughed.

"Disgusting only to your way of thinking; your present beliefs," Wilder said, after a sip of tea. "But there is so much more than sex involved with us. I can promise you power, Mr. Balon. I can promise—and deliver—to you, sir, anything you ever dreamed of. Join us, name it, and it's yours.

"No way," Sam said.

The fastidiously dressed agent of the devil smiled, leaning forward. "Do you really know what you're rejecting, Mr. Balon? Really? Sir, I'm offering you the entire world! Not just this world, but worlds beyond this. I'm offering you a hundred thousand millenniums of pure pleasure.

"I'm—"

"I'm not interested," Sam said. "My God offers me a million millenniums with Him. I prefer His offer."

"You are an incredible man, sir!"

"No," Sam countered, "just a man who believes very strongly in God."

"But He offers you nothing!"

"He offers me eternal life."

"But so do I! And so much more than that. Bah! You should take a glimpse of Heaven. Boring, sir, boring. There is absolutely nothing to do. Think of my offer, Mr. Balon, and name your pleasure. Young, sweet succulent girls of fifteen or sixteen, with openings so tight they would make you scream with delight. If that is your wish, I can give you dozens—hundreds of them. You want power? Name it. I'll give you power. I'll give you entire cities to rule—if you wish, I can name you supreme commander of entire galaxies."

"What? Galaxies? You mean there are other worlds beyond ours?"

"Of course, sir. Hundreds of them."

"Tell me about them."

Wilder smiled, folding his arms across his chest. "Are you interested, sir?"

"You'll do all this for me if I help you win Whitfield?"

"Exactly."

"No."

Wilder would not give up. He shifted his gaze to Jane Ann. "And you, my dear—what is your pleasure. Name it, it's yours."

She slipped her hand into Sam's. "I have my pleasure."

For just an instant, Wilder's eyes met Sam's. He knows, Sam thought. He knows I'm going to die. I wonder if he knows I'm going to beat him, though.

"Yes," Wilder said. "I do." He shifted his back to Jane Ann. "Would you not enjoy a thousand Sam Balons? All naked, with organs so large you would think they would never stop filling you? All of them ready to serve your every whim?"

Jane wondered about, but did not pursue the conversation Wilder just had with Sam. She smiled at Wilder. "I believe most women fantasize, Mr. Wilder. But I really don't care to be screwed with a baseball bat." She smiled at Sam's shocked expression. "Don't belittle it until you've experienced it," Nydia said. "I can assure you, my dear, being serviced by half a dozen men is something you'll never forget."

"I think I'll pass. Thanks just the same," Janey said.

Nydia looked at Wilder. She smiled, and with a minute shake of the head said, "Impossible."

"Yes," Wilder said, rising, "I believe you're right." He looked at Sam. "You won't reconsider, sir?"

"No."

"I'll speak with your little band of friends, perhaps."

"Go ahead, it won't do you a bit of good."

"Yes," Wilder smiled, but the muscles in his jaw were bunched with frustration, the smile forced. "I know. Very well, sir. You realize by now that we are not going to let you out of this county? Good. Well then, with that knowledge, you have something like twenty-four hours to make your peace with your God."

And the men again passed their silent messages.

I'm going to kill you, Sam projected.

Yes, Wilder acquiesced, but in doing so, you'll be

destroyed. What will you have gained?

Peace, and a place with my Father.

Bah!

"Please bear in mind, Mr. Balon: you will not beat me in the main," Wilder's smile was evil. "And consider this: after all the suffering and blood-letting of the elderly—which you are powerless to prevent; I will not and would not have let them escape—I will still have alternates you are not aware of. Knowing that, sir, I beg you to reconsider. Oh, my, Mr. Balon—what a team we could make."

"No."

Wilder and Nydia joined hands. "Adieu, monsieur, mademoiselle," he said, and they were gone, leaving behind them a slight smell of sulphur and two very startled people, staring at the empty room. "Sam? How—what—?"

"I can't explain it. The devil's powers almost equal God's. You have to remember, Satan was once an Angel."

Sam carefully picked up the cups Wilder and Nydia had used and tossed them into the garbage.

With the lights blazing in the front and back of the house, Sam turned off the lights in the living room—after carefully locking the door and windows—and he and Jane Ann slipped back into bed.

"Do men really lust after young girls?" she asked. "I mean—as much as Wilder implied?"

"Many of them do, yes." He cupped a breast in his big hand. "But with women like you around, I can't possibly imagine why." He felt the nipple grow in his hand.

"For a minister," she smiled in the darkness, "you're insatiable!"

"Horny, too," he laughed, kissing her.

She touched him, held him for a moment, and they were as one, and "Solomon's Song" made them content.

The touch of the sun woke them, and although they did not speak of it, both were grateful for the light.

She rose from the bed, pulling away from his arms. She stood by the bed, naked. Sam reached out to caress her thighs. A loving touch with his fingertips.

"You'd better put some clothes on, you shameless hussy," he grinned at her. "You should be ashamed of yourself, trying to tempt a minister."

She struck a lewd pose, hands cupping her breasts. "I did a pretty good job of it, you'll have to admit that."

He jerked her back into bed.

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He jerked her back into bed.

By noon they had packed up all they felt they would need and secured it in the bed of the truck, carefully wrapped in heavy tarps and tied down. Both of them knew they were being watched from all sides, but the street was deserted. Not a cat or a dog could be seen.

"It's eerie," Jane Ann said, watching Sam work, enjoying the way his powerful muscles rippled under his T-shirt.

"It's like a boil," Sam replied. "It'll pop soon."

Together, they made a last walk-through of the parsonage. "She was a very, very good actress," Sam said of Michelle. "It was her suggestion, her insistence, really, to come out here. Now I know why."

"Do you think she felt she would finally win you over to them?"

"At first, perhaps. But I believe toward the end she gave up. I think she was going to kill me."

The ringing of the phone startled them both. "We still have local service," Sam observed with a touch of sarcasm, picking up the receiver.

"Sam?" Wade yelled in his ear. "It's the church! It's on fire!"

No one came to fight the flames. The fire trucks sat idle in the deserted fire stations. Sam, Jane Ann, and their few friends stood in silence and watched the House of God consumed by the licking flames. Anita put her face in her hands and wept.

"It's just wood and glass and brick," Sam said, "It can be rebuilt. Saving our lives and our souls is more important right now."

A group of men and women had gathered across the street, watching the fire. They were drinking heavily, passing a bottle among them. An attorney, once a member of Sam's church, called out to the minister.

"Did you get some pussy last night, preacher? Janey suck your cock for you?"

The group howled with dirty laughter. One man opened the fly of his trousers and urinated in the street. "Hey, Faye?" he called. "You wanna come hold my fire hose?"

Chester balled his fists, taking a step in their direction. Sam's strong arm restrained him. "Take it easy, Ches. We'll just leave them. They're beyond help. But we'll deal with them later—I promise you that."

"I'm looking forward to it," the man spoke through gritted teeth.

Jimmy pulled up, his tires sliding black on the street. "The Catholic Church is on fire," he told them. "People are just standing around, watching it burn."

"I wanted to stay over there," Peter spoke from the passenger side of the pickup. "But Jimmy wouldn't let me."

"Wise decision," Sam said. "Come on, let's all go over to Chester's. We've got to plan where we're heading when this thing breaks open."

"If we can get out of town." Wade added.

"We'll get out," Sam promised.

"Why don't we leave now?" Jimmy asked.

"Two reasons," Sam said. "They won't let us, and it's not part of the rules."

"Rules?" Peter was astonished. "This . . . thing has rules!?"

"Yes," the minister said. "Like it or not, it does." He looked across the street at the knot of profane men. "And we're

playing on their court—for now."

"What happens when we get on our court?" Wade asked.

"We start killing!" the minister said flatly.

The afternoon wore on slowly. Shaky nerves became more evident among the Believers. Sam made all the women go to bed for a nap.

Over their protestations, he said, "It's going to be a very long night—and a very dangerous one. I want everyone as rested as possible. So go to sleep for an hour or so."

When the women had gone, Tony held up a bottle of pills for all to see.

"What are those?" Miles asked.

"Benzedrine. We may need them before this is over.

The men sat cleaning rifles, shotguns, pistols, and for Chester and Sam, automatic weapons.

"How many extra barrels you have for that Greaser, Ches?" Sam asked.

"Three," the man replied, not looking up from his cleaning. "One warps, just screw another on and keep on firing."

"Sam?" Miles asked. "You know, you never said, but exactly what are we going to do when—it starts?"

"Kill everyone who isn't one of us," Sam said it quickly and bluntly.

The cleaning of weapons ceased. Only Chester did not appear shocked. He said, "What did you people think we were going to do? Send them roses?"

"I've known some of those people out there all my life," Wade said softly. "All my life."

Sam quickly corrected that. "Not those people, . Those people out there, now, have sold their souls to Hell—and most of them did it willingly. Mind implantation, or not, we resisted it, and they could have, too. If their faith had been strong enough. They are not your friends."

"Two hundred to one, approximately," Jimmy said.

"What's that mean?" Peter asked.

"Our odds."

Jane Ann was the first one up from the napping. "I'm going to make some sandwiches. A lot of them. Wrap them up for tonight and tomorrow. I don't think we'll have much time for cooking."

"Sam?" Peter said. "I don't understand something. What are

They waiting for? Why don't they just attack us now—or try to, that is?"

Sam shook his head. "I can't really answer that, Pete. I've told you all about the rules Nydia and Wilder spoke of. I like to think that God is giving—has given—us a week to prepare for what lies ahead. That's the best I can do. Seven days," he mused. "The roads will be closed for seven days."

"It took God seven days, Sam," Chester said.

"Yes, and I can't help believing it's all tied in somehow." He shook his head in frustration. "I don't know. It's too much for one mortal man to comprehend. Listen to me, all of you: Tonight, when they make their move for us, it will come very quickly, violence always does. Chester has said the best spot for this first night is the old Talmage place, out in the Bad Lands. So if we get separated, head for there."

The other women had joined Jane Ann in the kitchen, happy to be doing something to occupy their hands and their minds.

The sun began to sink into the west, shadows deepening around the town. Tensions began to mount among the Christians in the house.

Sam walked out on the porch, taking stock of the situation, looking over the vehicles. Five pickup trucks. Everything they would need was packed away and tied down. They had enough ammunition to fight a major war—and they would need every round.

If only, Sam thought, God gives us the time to do this thing. And again, he thought: Why me?

Then it was full dark, and Sam knew the Disciples of Satan would wait no longer. He could practically feel their impatience to begin the hunt.

How do I know that? he questioned silently.

Sam ran to the porch, throwing open the door. "Mount up!" he said.

"But it's four hours 'til midnight," Wade argued.

"MOUNT UP!" Sam barked at them. His tone moved them into action.

They were outside, by their pickups. Everyone was armed. The eleven stood quietly in the night, listening to the rustle of leaves, the sighing winds from the prairie, and the thudding of their own hearts.

"Going on a camping trip?" the voice came behind them.

The men spun around, hands on the butt of weapons. No one had heard the two men come up. Otto Stockman and

Dalton Revere.

"Otto," Sam greeted the man. "Dalton. I've missed you at church lately."

The man spat his contempt, the spittle landing between Sam's booted feet.

A scream cut the night, shattering the illusion of peace.

"What in God's name was that?" Chester asked.

"A nonbeliever," Otto said. "There will be many more before this night is over."

"I thought we were all the nonbelievers?" Wade asked, his flesh goose-pimply from the screaming.

"Oh, no," Revere smiled. "There are many who are reluctant to serve any God with all their hearts. Sam knows, don't you, Sam?"

The minister said nothing.

The screaming was heard again, a hoarse yowling, as if more pain than a human could endure was being forced upon unwilling flesh. Then a choking cry, and the night was silent.

Otto laughed, an evil barking in the evening's murkiness.

"Mrs. Johnson's house," Chester said. "Two houses down." He looked at Otto. "You people are crazy! You're murderers!"

"The mass is almost ready to begin," Dalton said, holding out his hand. "It will be beautiful. Won't you join us? It's your last chance."

"Yes," Otto said. "Join us—do."

"Otto?" Sam pleaded with the man. "What has happened to your faith? To your belief in our God? He hasn't forsaken you. Give this up."

Revere and Stockman laughed. "Your God, Sam," Dalton said, "not ours. Our Master gives pleasure, joy we can touch with our hands, not empty promises. Our God lives; I can touch him, see him. Where is your God?"

"All around us, Dalton. Everywhere. I shouldn't have to tell you that." He looked at Otto. "Where is your wife?"

The man grinned. "Being serviced by Servants of the Master. She's beginning to come around to the pleasures of our God."

Jane Ann stood by Sam's side. She moved closer to him as Dalton's eyes traveled over her body, lingering at her breasts, her crotch, moving, undressing her with his possessed mind.

"Being serviced?" Wade questioned. "What do you mean?"

The man rubbed his crotch and grinned, "We've been having a party at my house this afternoon."

"Your wife is being—*serviced*?" Anita grimaced. "Otto,

you're disgusting!"

A strange chant drifted through the night. A hundred or more voices chanting in the distance, in unison. It was the chant Sam had faintly heard on the wind that night at Tyson's Lake. Now he could understand the word, and that word was DIE.

"Get into the trucks," Sam ordered,

"You'll never leave this town alive," Dalton warned him. "I'm giving you all a chance, don't you see? We don't want to harm you; we just *want* you. The time is now. He is here. He has returned."

"He's always been here," Sam said, disgust in his voice. He knew there was no point in attempting to try to change Dalton's mind.

"You're all fools!" Otto cried. "Fools! Listen! Look around you. We've come for you. Join us—the pleasures are wonderful; there for the taking. Look!"

A hundred or more men, women, and children had gathered at both ends of the street, blocking it. They stood shoulder to shoulder. Sam knew them all. Their eyes were glowing red with evil, and they chanted: Die!

Dalton glared at Doris. She shrank from his lusting eyes. "I've always wanted to fuck a Jew bitch. To personally thank you for killing that pig, Christ. I will, this night." He reached for the woman.

Miles acted before he thought, his pistol jumped into his hand. The .38 barked twice, the slugs hitting Dalton in the chest. Miles screamed curses as the man fell backward into the street. Survival took over, as pictures of Dachau, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz filled Miles' brain.

"*Not again!*" he screamed, emptying his pistol into Dalton's twitching body.

Doris pulled him back, toward their truck.

Survival gripped them all, shoving civilized mores to the rear.

Otto ran screaming into the night. "Kill them! Kill the men. We want the women!"

The mob moved forward, chanting, "Die Die Die!"

"Roll it!" Sam shouted, and the eleven ran for their trucks. "You drive," Sam told Jane Ann. He reached for the Thompson, jacking a round in the chamber. "Don't stop for anything. Just roll right over them."

"Sam!"

"Do it!" he shouted. "*Move!*"

She jerked the transmission into gear and roared into the night, toward the growing mob of devil-worshippers at the end of the street. Fifty yards from them, Sam leaned out the window and pulled the trigger, the SMG on full auto. The slugs sparked through the night, slamming men women and teenagers backward, to lie jerking on the street.

And still they came.

Jane Ann gripped the wheel and roared into the crowd, shutting her mind to the crunching and breaking of bones and the slick pop of mauled flesh. Several of the possessed climbed onto the truck, in the bed, on the hood, on the running boards. Sam hammered at them with his big fists, slashing at them with his big-bladed knife, finally jerking out his .45, firing at point-blank range.

"Hard left!" he shouted.

She spun the wheel, sending the man in the bed of the truck flying through the air. He landed on a spike of a wrought-iron fence, the point impaling him, driving through his chest. He died screaming, dangling from the fence, his legs jerking.

The little caravan was clear of one street. "Head for the south Bad Lands!" Sam yelled.

They roared through town, past burning churches and bonfires filled with Bibles and church hymnals and pews. They screamed past blockades set up by the Satan-worshippers, cutting across yards and down side streets. Sam glanced behind him. Everyone was with him. For now.

"Sam!" Jane Ann screamed. "The road is blocked."

A deputy crouched behind a patrol car, grinning at them in the headlights' glare, his teeth yellow and fanged. Sam leveled the .45 and shot the man/thing in the face, blowing away part of his head. The deputy fell backward, but he would not die. Appearing as a terrible apparition, the bloody thing staggered to its feet, lurching in front of the truck, arms outstretched, fingers working in killing anticipation.

"Roll over it!" Sam yelled. "Smash it!"

Jane Ann felt sickness well in her throat. She fought it back and floor-boarded the truck, hitting the creature with the front bumper, rolling over it. The others did the same, until the man/thing was a bloody, smashed smear in the street.

But it would not die.

As the caravan roared into the night, clear of Whitfield, none of them witnessed the hideousness pull itself to the curb and slide disgustingly into a gutter opening, leaving a trail of

crimson behind it. In the darkness of the sewer it hid itself, under the town of Whitfield, to wait, to heal.

The caravan was out of Whitfield, heading for the Bad Lands. Five vehicles, eleven people, racing to the unknown, running from horror.

The town soon became an open pocket of death as the possessed went from house to house, searching out those not of themselves. Only a few would escape. They would crouch in their basements, in the darkness, with their fear. Only a few, hiding.

Beasts roamed the streets, slobbering, howling, following the direction of the appointed Coven leaders. Many of the elderly were the first to die. And the Beasts feasted. Old man Word held them off for several hours with a rifle, until he was overwhelmed by sheer numbers. He died not believing his eyes.

"Sam should have warned me," he muttered, as life left him. Then he remembered what the preacher had said as they stood in the door of the church that Sunday. "He *did* try to warn us!"

The grunting sounds of rape and degradation filled the night air, as men and women of all ages were passed naked from Coven member to Coven member. Some would join the Satan-Worshippers; some were given to the Beasts. They were mounted, mated, and bitten. Where there had been only a few Beasts, soon there would be many.

Crude crosses were fashioned, and some who would not renounce their faith were nailed onto the timbers. Others were tortured for hours.

Evil was the name of Whitfield this night.

"Balon got away," Wilder raged at Addison. "Because you could not keep your people in line. I warned you, Addison."

"But, Master, they can't get out of this area."

"This area, idiot, is thousands of square miles!"

"But all roads are blocked. Every range is covered. Our people are everywhere—watching. They can't get away." A sly gleam slipped into his eyes. "I couldn't control them, Master, because they wanted to serve you. They love you."

"Yes, yes!" Wilder was impatient with Addison, wanting to be rid of him. The man was useless; a fool. "Nydia," he called, "come. This man has served us well, and he has lusted for you. Take him, and pleasure him." He smiled at the Raven-haired witch, a silent message passing between them.

Addison felt an erection growing as he gazed at Nydia, to him, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. In the midst of all the carnage that night, with the screaming of the dying drifting around them, she took Addison's hand into her incredibly soft hand, leading him to a nearby home, into a bedroom.

Quickly, Addison stripped, standing naked before her. She opened her robe, allowing him to view her body. She was woman in perfection, without blemish, everything any man—all men-have dreamed of. Addison sucked in his breath as she dropped the robe to the floor.

Nydia sat on the bed, allowing Walter to fondle her breasts, her belly. She lay back, opening her legs, and he fell on her in his haste. He pushed his erection inside her, groaning as she took him. In heat, he did not notice her mouth working at his neck; did not notice her teeth sharpening into fangs, and felt only a second's pain as she bit him, sucking a few drops of life's blood from him.

Nydia sucked at his neck as he humped on her, giving her no pleasure except the taste of his blood. In his rush to have her, he climaxed quickly, rolling from her, to lie panting on the side of the bed. He felt dizzy and weak. His mouth felt strange, as though his teeth and tongue had grown larger.

Then, as the infection spread through him, he knew what he had become. He looked up at the woman standing over him, still naked. But he felt no lust for her, only a wish to serve her. As the contagion settled into his brain, suspending all once-human reasoning, Walter Addison, who had plotted with the devil to kill Sheriff Marsh, became a member of the Undead.

"You," Nydia said, pointing a finger at him, "will join the others. Find Balon and his followers. You will kill the others, make them as yourself—if possible. But you will not harm Balon. I want him. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Nydia." His voice was strange, a hollow sound pushing past a swollen tongue, fanged and bloodless lips.

"Go! But remember, you must seek shelter at the first hint of light. Go!"

She licked her lips as she watched him shuffle out the back door, into the night, red-tinged with what was left of the fires from the churches. It was not often Wilder allowed her this pleasure, and her bloodlust had been aroused, but not appeased, Blood. She wanted blood.

Slipping into her robe, its color blending with the darkness

of the night, the vampiress began her hunt. For blood. For the sweet/salty taste of life.

A child, a boy, not more than ten or eleven, ran past her in the night, screaming out his terror at all he had seen. Nydia twisted her fingers in his hair, throwing him to the damp earth and grass, pinning him with arms made strong by centuries of evil.

She bent her head, her dark hair fanning over his face, and opened her mouth, sinking her teeth into his neck, holding the child as he jerked and whined. She drank deeply, then threw back her head and howled at the sky.

She left the boy on the earth, his neck bleeding. In moments, he had changed. He rose to his feet, unsteady for a moment, then walked away to join the others, his eyes dead, his teeth fanged.

Sam stopped the caravan some twenty miles from Whitfield, deep in the rolling Bad Lands.

"It's night when we're in the greatest danger," he reminded them. "There will be dozens of Undead before this night is over. We'll have to post guards at all times." The asylum sprang into mind, with its occupants of disfigured, mindless lunatics. He knew Wilder would, before this week was over, order the guards to release the inmates.

And they would have to face that horror.

Shock had just struck the women: the chase, the getaway, had kept their minds from dwelling on their impossible situation. Now, some of them knelt on the ground, weeping, shaking uncontrollably.

Sam put his arms around Jane Ann, holding her, hoping some of his strength would transmit to her. He held her as she cried. Sam, as most men, felt totally inadequate with a sobbing woman.

He patted her shoulder and said, "There, there, now." And felt like a fool doing it

"Oh, shut up!" she pushed away. "A woman needs to cry at times." She smiled up at him. "Stop trying to burp me."

Sam looked around him in the dimness of the makeshift camp. His friends stood grinning at him. The tension had snapped—for now. "Okay, Sam," Tony said. "It's all up to you and Chester. The rest of us don't know a thing about combat."

Suddenly, Sam was back in Korea, with his team. "Chester, take the first watch. Jimmy, the second. I'll take the dog watch. At good light, we'll make our plans."

At two o'clock, Sam rolled from his blankets, away from the warmth of Jane Ann, to take his watch. The dog watch, that lonesome time until daylight. As he squatted with his back to a tree, his eyes constantly moving, shifting from hill to hill, roaming over the terrain, Sam formulated a battle plan.

As he had told the others, there was no point in trying to run for help, for even if they did manage to get out of this section of Fork—which was highly unlikely—probably impossible—and reached help, say the State Police, and returned, what could they prove? Nothing. All his senses told him that by this time tomorrow, Whitfield would look like any other small town. Stores could be open for business, people could be moving about, shopping. The fires could be explained, perhaps not to everyone's satisfaction, but enough to satisfy all but the most doubtful. There would be no bodies lying about. Everything would be normal enough to satisfy the uninitiated.

No, they could not run away. They had to fight. For the greatest reason of them all. And his friends did not question that.

At night, though, at night, that's when Whitfield would work its evil, worshipping Satan. The town had to be destroyed.

But to kill them all!

The thought was staggering in its enormity. But Sam could think of no other way.

By now, he knew Wilder would have people looking for them. There were cowboys who knew every inch of Fork. They would surely be working toward them. But they would come in the light, were susceptible to lead. The living did not worry Sam too much.

But the Undead. The night people. And the people like Michelle; how many were there? That was another matter. Squatting there, with the ruins of the Talmage place silhouetted to his left, Sam tried to work out a plan. Surely, they would have to—

Something moved just to his right. Whatever it was had stepped on a twig, snapping the dryness. Sam remained still, only his eyes moving. Whatever it was came closer. Sam slowly lifted the muzzle of the Thompson, easing the SMG off safety. If it was one of the Undead, perhaps he could not kill it with the machine gun, but he could stop it long enough to grab a stake. Sam had fitted a drum onto the belly of the

Thompson. Sixty rounds of .45 caliber ammunition.

The thing drew nearer, moving stealthily through the moonless night. It moved with a shuffling motion, almost clumsy as it came.

Sweat beaded Sam's forehead as the thing made a noise unlike anything Sam had ever heard before. A non-human sound, as if heavy jaws were chewing on something.

And then it mooed. A cow.

Sam slowly expelled his breath, relaxing tense muscles, easing his grip on the Thompson. And then the thought came to him: the devil can take the shape of any thing, any animal. If the devil can do that, could not his true disciples do the same? Could not the devil will his work to any animal—any human?

Sam looked closer, his smile grim as his suspicions became facts. The animal's eyes were blood red and unblinking. The drool from its lips stank. And Sam knew where he'd smelled that before.

He eased down on one knee, bracing against the kick and the climb of the weapon on full automatic. The animal was less than five yards from him when he leveled the Thompson and pulled the trigger, starting the fire at the animal's legs and allowing for the rise of the powerful weapon. He emptied half the sixty round drum into the cow. The animal screamed in an unHoly wail, the heavy slugs actually lifting the cow off its front hooves.

Undead it may be, but in human or animal form, it was subject—unless it had time to prepare itself—to damage, just as any mortal, breathing, living thing. And Sam shot it to bloody rags.

The thing thrashed and howled on the ground, its legs smashed and broken, unable to hold its assumed weight. Sam shot it between the eyes, putting ten rounds in its head, in its brain. As his friends gathered around, rubbing sleep from their eyes, flashlights in their hands, the thing began its metamorphosis, changing from animal to human and back to animal, until nothing was left except a dirty, stinking pile of rags and bones.

"Dear God!" Wade said.

"That's where we've got them!" Sam said, as triumph filled him. "That's what I didn't know. Now I do. If we find them by day, they'll be sleeping, resting in the gloom; we drive a stake through their hearts. At night, if they're in any other form, they can be killed. I don't know why, but they can."

"Do we kill every animal on this range?" Tony asked.

"If we have to," Sam said, looking to the east. Just the faintest tint of pink was forming. Sam smiled, but it was not the smile of a gentle man of God. It was the smile of a warrior. "We take the fight to them," he said, then turned and walked back to the camp area for a cup of coffee.

Miles observed, "I think he's actually looking forward to this fight."

"Yes," Jane Ann said. "He is." There was a touch of fear in her voice.

She backed up and bumped into a stinking object. Screaming, she spun away before the thing could put its arms around her. As her shrieking cut the predawn, Jane Ann looked around and into the lifeless eyes of Sheriff Marsh. She had attended his funeral months back.

Sam ran back to the group, a stake in his hand. The creature lurched and drooled at Sam. The minister spun, faked a move, then brought the stake up and drove it into the thing's chest.

It died on the ground.

"Leave it," Sam ordered. "Let's go—we've work to do."

In the darkness of a bedroom, heavy drapes protecting her eyes from the outside world, Nydia lay naked on the bed, holding her arms out for Wilder, her voluptuousness aching for him. She opened her legs, ready to receive him.

"You gorged yourself last evening," he scolded her. "I should have known you would overreact if I turned you loose as what you once were."

She smiled, her grin a grotesque spreading of her lips, for her teeth were fanged.

"Contain yourself," Wilder ordered. "And transform. Do it!"

Her tongue began to shrink in size, losing its blood-red color. She ran her tongue over her lips, her eyes losing their wild tint. Her teeth were normal. Her chest rose and fell in anticipation of Wilder's assault upon her, her heavy breasts with jutting nipples quivered.

She fondled him, and obscenities rolled from her tongue.

"You really are a crude bitch, Nydia," he taunted her.

"Damn you, Black! Don't make me beg for it."

She screamed as he penetrated her.

The town of Whitfield lay dead-like under the early

morning sun; cut off from the outside, receiving no visitors until all was ready.

George Best sat in the sheriff's office, naked from the waist down, his legs spread wide. A young girl, scarcely in her teens, crouched between his legs, giving him oral sex. Best picked up the phone at the first ring.

"No problems at all," he said, after listening for a few seconds. "Everything is fine as wine here, Governor."

He listened for a few more seconds. "No, sir," Best said, smiling. "No, sir, we don't anticipate any problems at all, Governor. I can assure you, by this time next week, we'll have everything back to normal." He smiled. "Just as it was before the roads were closed. Yes, sir, I'll sure be in touch with your office if we need any help. Oh, he's asleep, sir. Not much going on around Whitfield. Thank you, sir. I'll sure give Sheriff Addison your best."

He hung up the phone, laughing. Placing his hands on the young girl's head, he pushed his erection deeper into her mouth. He began laughing louder. The devil's laughter.

The young girl moaned her pleasure.

Across the street, in what was once Long's Coffee Shop, several teenagers were engaged in a gang bang with an older woman. Several young girls watched them, waiting their turn.

The moans of the tortured could be heard in the heating summer air.

Whitfield stank of evil, of deprivation, of passions gone berserk, of blood, and of the un-Godly.

And out in the Bad Lands, Walter Addison slept on the floor of a closet, in an abandoned shack. Hiding from God's light, he waited for darkness, to resume the hunt.

THURSDAY - THE FIRST DAY

Sam watched the five cowboys ride toward the ridge where they were hiding. He had put aside his Thompson, replacing it with one of Chester's M-1s. Chester held an identical .30-06 military rifle cradled in his arms.

"You take the two on the right," Sam whispered. "I'll take the other three."

"How do we know they're possessed?"

"We don't. Want to invite them up the hill and ask them?"

Chester shook his head. "I'll pass on that. They're wearing medallions around their necks. Guess that settles it."

Five seconds later, there were five empty saddles.

The men walked down the hill to the still-writhing men. Sam pointed the muzzle of the M-1 at a cowboy's head.

"Give me a break!" the man begged.

"Sure," Sam said. "Just like you would have given me a break."

"Fuck you!" the cowboy snarled, spitting at Sam. The foamy red spittle hit Sam on the leg of his jeans.

Sam squeezed the trigger, then went to the next man, with Chester following suit. Watching from the ridge, Wade shuddered, "I wouldn't want either of them for an enemy."

Back in camp, Sam said, "Let's pack it up and move it. Ches, you said you knew where there was some dynamite."

"Right, and some gasoline while we're there. Over on the Cherry Creek range. They've been doing some blasting. Ever handled dynamite, Sam?"

"No. In Korea we used plastic. Easy to handle."

"So's dynamite. Before I bought the shop, I worked with explosives."

"Where is the blockhouse?"

"Right on the edge of the range. But for sure it'll be well guarded."

Sam nodded absently, spreading a map on the hood of a truck. "Wade, you take the people here," he pointed to a mark on the map, then glanced at his watch. "Ches and I will get the dynamite and fill up the extra gas cans and meet you there at noon." He looked hard at the editor, "Don't take any chances, Wade. Shoot first and ask questions later."

Wade swallowed, then nodded his agreement, "All right,

Sam."

The minister glared at his friend. "I mean it. I'm not going to dick around with you or anybody else. Jane Ann's safety is in your hands. *Can you do it?*"

"Yes!" Wade replied hotly.

"You'd better," the warrior-turned-minister turned warrior said.

"Let's ask God's help," Faye said, breaking the silent tension between the two friends. "Let's all join hands."

It was a strange sight on the prairie, in the rolling hills of Fork County. These people praying within sight of five men they had just killed. Chester prayed, asking God to help them, to give them strength to combat the evil that surrounded them, that faced them all.

The circle broke up, the Christians walking back to their trucks. Sam stopped Wade. "Any route you take is going to be dangerous, Wade, it's up to you. But I believe moving is the only way we're going to stay alive."

"I know, Sam," he clasped the minister on the shoulder. "And don't worry, I'll do my part. I don't believe we have a choice any longer. I'll shoot first, apologize later. I'm going to cut across Sugar Ridge and down into Winding Creek, follow the creek bed. It's dry this time of year."

The men shook hands, wishing each other luck. Chester spent a few moments with Faye; Sam with Jane Ann.

"I'm not usually the weeping type, Sam," she said, her lips just brushing his. "So I'll see you in camp in a few hours."

Sam smiled. "Behave yourself around Tony—he's a good-looking young stud. Makes a lot more money than a preacher."

"You have hidden talents, Sam," she winked at him.

He touched her face with his strong, blunt fingers, then left her, walking to Chester's pickup, stopping along the way to get his Thompson and a length of wire with small pieces of wood attached to either end.

"What is that thing, Sam?" Miles asked.

"It's a garrote, Miles. We used them in Korea."

"Silent killing."

"Very. But you have to know how to use them. If you come around too hard, the victim is decapitated, then you've got a headless body flopping around on the ground, making noises with his feet. Destroys the silent operation."

Miles' face was a little pale. "That ever happen to you, Sam?"

"Only once. It was quite a sight to see."

The prairie was silent after Wade led the little caravan off, with only the wind to keep the two men company.

"Sam? When we've got the dynamite, what are we going to do with it?"

The minister's eyes grew cold as a snake's gaze. "We're going to destroy Whitfield and the outlying ranches. Hopefully, we're going to kill every Godless bastard in this part of Fork."

Chester chuckled. "Preacher, your language is shocking.

It was the longest half hour Chester had spent since combat in the Pacific. He thought Sam would never return from the blockhouse. His nerves began working on him, causing him to jump with every sound of nature. A songbird twittered happily above him and Chester almost blew it into the next county, holding back firing the .45 caliber Greasegun just at the last second.

The next county, he thought, is where I wish we all were right now.

He thought of Sam. The man has more cold nerve than any man I've ever seen. Miles was right: he is looking forward to this fight.

He almost soiled his shorts when Sam touched him on the shoulder. He leaped to his feet, heart pounding. "JESUS CHRIST!"

"Every direction is your perimeter when you're alone, Ches," Sam gently scolded him. "You're forgetting your good Marine Corps training. I came up behind you."

"No shit! Now you tell me! My heart is hammering." He looked in the direction of the blockhouse. "How many men are there?"

"None, now."

"How many were there?"

"Two. They were easy. Come on."

The sight of the dead men did not bother Chester; he had seen much, much worse in the brutal fighting in the Pacific. But if ten days ago, if someone had told him his minister would slip past armed guards and slit their throats, Chester would have called him a liar. The guards lay sprawled in death. One had been strangled with the garrote, the other had his throat cut.

Chester broke the lock on the blockhouse with a tire iron from his pickup's toolbox. It was dark and cool in the shed.

"Get those boxes of caps over there," he told Sam. "Be careful with them." He looked around. "There's enough dynamite in here to blow up half of Fork County. This is good grade stuff, too."

"Did you see those medallions on the guards?"

Chester nodded, carrying a box of dynamite to his truck.

"We have to assume everyone at Cherry Creek ranch is one of them. We'll take them out first. Then work around the county, ranch by ranch."

"Saving Whitfield for last?"

"Exactly," Sam put another box of caps in the back of the truck. He sat them down roughly.

Chester winced. "Sam! Please be careful. The caps are more dangerous than the dynamite. I've seen them blow when you least expect it."

"Sorry," Sam grinned. "I wasn't thinking."

"How do we take the ranch, Sam?"

"By surprise. Just like Cowboys and Indians. Let's fill the gas cans and we'll drop them off, pick them up on the way back. I'll tell you along the way."

"You mean, just the two of us?"

"That's all we need, old friend. Providing everything goes as planned, that is."

The men were a mile from the ranch, hidden in the trees by one of the hundreds of small lakes in the county. Chester was busy arming sticks of dynamite.

"You're certain you can tell within seconds when each stick will blow?" Sam asked.

"Positive." Chester did not look up from his work. "You want six explosions, eight to ten seconds apart, but you want us to be on the other side of the ranch before the first charge blows? And all the charges concentrated on this side of the ranch?"

"Right. The first charge will draw them out of the ranch house. The other charges will, hopefully, hold their attention and cover the sound of our coming in until we're on top of them. Can you do that?"

"No sweat," Chester said, measuring and cutting lengths of fuse. He armed the sticks, inserted the fuses—each a different length—and stood up. "I'll plant them about two hundred feet apart."

The men sat in the pickup, on the other side the ranch, waiting for the first charge to blow hoping, the long fuses had not gone out. Chester had armed a dozen more sticks of dynamite, inserting five to ten second fuses in each stick or bundle of three sticks taped together. Sam held a half dozen sticks in his right hand, a Zippo lighter in his left hand. He was softly whistling a light tune: "The Happy Wanderer."

Chester glanced at him and shook his head in disbelief at the whistling. He looked at his watch. "Thirty seconds to Fire in the Hole." He slipped the pickup into gear.

"We clean out the first nest of filth," Sam said quietly, just as the first charge blew. "Be ready to change directions when I yell," he cautioned his friend.

"I will admit this," Chester said. "I'm scared." He let out the clutch.

The minister changed his whistling tune: "Pistol Packing Mamma." "You're incredible!" Chester said.

The ranch yard filled with men and women, most of them naked or half naked. The second charge blew, locking their attentions in the direction of the blasts.

"Roll it," Sam said.

Chester floorboarded the truck, roaring toward the ranch yard filled with Satan-worshippers. As the last explosions faded, the pickup shot into the yard. Three sticks of dynamite sputtered in Sam's hand. Chester was sweating as he stole a glance at the lighted charges. Sam appeared calm. He casually tossed the dynamite in the middle of a startled group of men and women.

"Hard left!" he yelled, and Chester spun the wheel.

The explosions rocked the truck, sending bits of dirt and rock flying around them, along with various parts of human bodies. Sam tossed more dynamite as Chester completed the circle, returning to the scene of confusion, dust, and death.

The yard was in chaos, the moaning and yelling and deafening eruptions confusing the men and women. Sam let fly four more sticks of dynamite, blowing a half dozen members of Wilder's Coven to Hell—to the arms of their newly-adopted Master.

"May you live in eternal agony," Sam muttered, then yelled, "Hard right! When you get to the far out-building, stop—we'll go it on foot."

"Yes, Sergeant York," Chester mumbled, spinning the wheel.

The yard was a smoking, dusty deathtrap. At the out-

building, the men jumped out, automatic weapons yammering, singing a metallic death song set in .45 caliber tempo.

They left no survivors. Sam went to each downed, moaning, cursing person, ending their life here on earth, sending them to their dubious pleasures.

Then the yard was silent, the stink of death heavy/sweet in the dust.

The house was noiseless as Sam looked at it.

"There will probably be at least one of the Undead in there," he said, touching a stake shoved behind his belt, "hiding in a dark place. Get a vial of Holy Water from the truck, Ches. I'll check the other buildings before we go into the house."

With a fresh clip in the belly of the Thompson, Sam carefully checked the large garage, the barn, and the bunkhouse. All empty of any kind of life. Back in the yard, a half-naked woman, stunning and cursing, crawled toward a pistol on the ground, beside a dead man. She looked up at Sam with eyes that burned black hate. She cursed him loudly.

Knowing he was allowing a small meanness to grow in him, Sam let the woman crawl until her hand touched the butt of the gun. A half-second burst from the SMG lifted her off the ground, turning her, twisting her sideways, slamming her back, dead in the dirt, her bare legs spread obscenely.

The yard was silent, the air filled with the odor of blood and the sharp stink of relaxing bladders. "I'll go in," Sam said, refilling the clip with cartridges from his pockets. "Get this over with. We've got to get out of here. Those explosions will surely draw some unwelcome company this way.

"You want me to go with you?"

"No. You watch for company. I'll do this."

Sam slipped into the house, walking carefully from room to room, inspecting all the closets, all the bedrooms—nothing. In the kitchen, he found the door to the basement locked.

He knew, then, where he would find the Undead, and Sam was not at all happy at the prospect of venturing down into that darkness.

Taking a deep breath, he kicked in the door with his heavy Jump Boots, then fumbled on the side wall for the light switch. The basement burst into light, flooding the darkness with brilliance. Sam moved slowly down the steps, his eyes shifting from side to side, taking in all he could see of the cluttered basement. Behind a packing crate, in the far corner

of the dirty basement, he saw legs protruding from behind the crate. Sam touched the stake in his belt and moved toward the legs.

The lights went out, plunging the basement into darkness.

A hiss and a moan from behind the crate, and Sam knew he was almost out of time. The Undead had sensed danger, coming to life in the dark as his Master turned out the lights. Sam heard the sound of feet shuffling on the floor. He fumbled for his Zippo, sparking the lighter into flame. The Undead hissed at the flickering glow, moving toward Sam, its mouth open, exposing fanged teeth and a blood-red tongue, grotesque in its thickness.

Sam sat the lighter on a box, lifted the Thompson, and pulled the trigger, holding it back. He started the burst at ankle level, the rise of the weapon lifting to the creature's face. Sam fought the Thompson, attempting to keep the line of fire from going too far to the right, the natural rise of the weapon in the hands of a right-handed shooter.

Sam literally blew the Undead to bits. Its left leg was shredded, dangling. One shoulder was gapped, pieces of meat and bone scattered about the basement. Half its face, its jaw, was missing from the impact of the heavy slugs.

And still, Bill Mathis, the high school principal, dragged its macabre being toward Sam, hissing and snarling and yowling, the hands outstretched, fingers working.

Sam fumbled for the canteen hooked onto his web belt, practically tearing the cap off in his haste. He doused the thing with Holy Water, and it screamed in pain as the water, blessed by Father Dubois, boiled on impact with Godless flesh, searing the dead meat, exposing the whiteness of bone.

Sam dropped the empty Thompson on the box, jerked the stake from his belt, and ran toward the thrashing creature, driving the stake deep in its chest. A horrible howling ripped from the mouth of the Undead. A stench filled the dark, musty basement as pus erupted from its throat, spraying Sam with foulness. Using both hands, Sam worked the stake deeper, until he pierced the heart. The un-Godly squalled in pain as it fell back against a wall, moaning and kicking as it died.

The lights came back on.

Sam stood panting, his chest heaving from fright and rattled nerves. He watched the metamorphosis take place as Bill Mathis finally died, the creature working its way back through time-only God and Satan knowing just how far back.

Within seconds, only a rotting pile of stinking rags marked the spot where Godless met Godly.

Sam picked up his Thompson and his Zippo, bending down to ignite the pile of newspapers, watching them roar into flames. He walked up the steps, his back tingling, as if expecting a blow. He met Chester at the top of the stairs.

"I never heard such howling in my life. What in God's name was that?"

"Bill Mathis. He was one of them. Like Michelle."

"Might account for so many of the kids going over Satan's side."

"Yeah." His eyes touched Chester's. "I know, Chester.. I stink. Come on, let's drag these bodies into the house. Burn them. That way we'll know they can't become what I just destroyed."

So they dragged the twisted, mangled, broken bodies into the smoky house, Chester said, "I wish there was some other way. Can't people like these be helped, Sam? Isn't there some way we can undo what has been done to them?"

"I don't know how to exorcise an entire county, Ches. I really don't understand exorcism to begin with. But I do know it's got to be done one on one." He piled another bloody corpse in the living room. The floor was beginning to get hot from the flames in the basement. "Unless God intervenes, I'm afraid this is the only way."

Outside, the men stood away from the house watching it explode into flames, the roof caving in.

"Don't feel sorry for them, Ches—they knew what they were doing; what they were accepting They had a choice. It's nobody's fault but their own."

"Maybe somebody will see the smoke," Chester said, watching the smoke soar into the sky. "Come to help us."

"No," Sam said. "Nobody will see it. A plane could fly a hundred feet off the ground, right over it, and would not see it. Their Master has taken care of that. We're in this alone, Ches. Better accept that fact."

Driving away from the smoking ruins, Sam said, "Yes, Ches, they can be helped—but they've got to *want* that help. God does not expect man to be perfect, but He does expect man to *try*. Our God is a vengeful God, Ches. It's not wise to cross Him."

"After we pick up the extra gas cans," Chester said, "we'll stop at that old dump, pick up a couple dozen empty whiskey bottles. They make dandy Molotov cocktails."

"Yeah," the preacher smiled. "Mix a little with the gas and you've got homemade napalm."

"I don't like the idea of you going out alone and—headhunting," Wade said. "I think it best we stay together from now on."

Late afternoon in Fork County, the shadows beginning to paint the rolling hills and prairies with a darker brush, the deepening gray reminding them all that night would soon be on them, and the evil that would surface with the darkness.

"I agree with Wade," Miles said. "I think we'd be safer in a—a—"

"Wolf pack?" Sam finished the sentence.

"Yes," Tony said. "If that's what you want to call it."

Sam rose from his squatting position, a freshly sharpened stake in his hand. "None of you realises what you're in for—what you're saying, But perhaps you're right. We'll do this together." He searched the prairie in all directions.

"What are you looking for, Sam?" Jane Ann asked.

"Some of the Undead. They're out there. I can feel them."

The small group looked around them, fear touching each heart, brows wrinkling with concern. Hands unknowingly went to weapons, as if the lethal steel or the smooth stock or butt of the weapon would somehow comfort them.

"I don't feel anything out of the ordinary," Jimmy said, but his hand did not leave the butt of the .38 belted around his waist.

"That pistol won't do you much good against the Undead," Sam told him. "I put thirty rounds of .45 caliber ammunition into Bill Mathis. I literally blew him to bits with this Thompson. But he kept coming. They are not human, you all must remember that. They are not human, and they are not animal—they're dead people walking upright. I want you all to keep a canteen of Holy Water with you at all times. And a stake." His eyes touched them all. "We took the fight to them this morning; we hit them where they live, and they can't allow us to get away with that. So they'll be coming at us tonight. For now, you all had better get some rest. Go on, I'll take the watch."

He walked up the small hill above the cottonwoods where they made camp. He stood alone on the hill.

"I feel as though I should be up there with him," Jane Ann said. "But I also feel he would send me right back down here."

"He would," Anita agreed. "Sam looks upon this as *his* battle—*his* fight. We're just his soldiers."

"You should have seen him this afternoon." Chester spoke from the shade of his pickup. "He moves like a cat. I did some work with Marine Raiders once; Sam is as good and probably better than those guys. I didn't believe anyone could come up behind me without my knowing it, but Sam did. And damn near scared me out of my pants doing it. But Wade is right: we're going to have to stay together."

One by one they drifted off to sleep in the late afternoon. Jane Ann was the last one to slip into the silence of deep rest. When she finally closed her eyes, the thing she remembered was the outline of her man, alone on the hill, with his weapon, his stake, his Holy Water, and his God, watching over them all. Sam, calm, sure, strong—waiting for the night to bring the fight to him.

And the thought came to her: Sam would willingly die to save them.

She slept restlessly.

Sam touched her on the shoulder, bringing her out of sleep, her heart pounding. Full dark on the prairie. She could see only the bulk of him.

"They're coming," he told her. "I've told the others. Get ready." He was gone into the night.

Sam had changed clothing, into black, to blend into the night.

"We're awake, Janey," Faye said. "I saw Sam, I'll be darned if I saw where he went when he left you. The man moves like a ghost."

A scream cut the night. A horrible choking sound; a cry of pure anguish, tapering off into a blubber of pain. Silence. They heard Sam laughing in the darkness.

"He's deliberately goading them!" Peter said. "He's killing them, then taunting them."

Miles suddenly ran to the edge of the camp, a stake in his hand. "They're all around us!" he shouted. He stepped into the blackness.

A hissing in the night. A coughing thud. The thump of something heavy falling to the ground.

"MILES!" Doris shouted.

Screaming from out of the darkness, ending with a strangling sound. Miles backed into his circle of friends, his hands shaking.

"I killed one of—Them!" he said. "Oh, my God!"

The yammer of Sam's Thompson split the night. Things ran away into the blackness.

Silence.

Sam walked back into the camp, as calmly as if he had done nothing more exciting than duck hunting. He built up the fire, then looked at the body lying between two trucks. A long stake protruded from its chest.

"I don't know this one," Sam said, walking over to drag the carcass out of sight. The face was pockmarked and rotted, and the stench was the worst he'd smelled thus far.

Sam picked up a foot and began to drag the Undead from their camp. The leg came off in his hands.

Behind him, Jane Ann began screaming. "That's my father!" she shrieked. "My father!" She fell unconscious to the ground.

Tony gave her a shot after Sam carried her to their sleeping bags. "This will keep her out the rest of the night and probably most of next morning. She needs it, Sam. That was a hell of a shock she just had."

Sam pulled a blanket over his wife, then walked back to the fire with the doctor. He poured a cup of coffee as Miles said, "Mr. Burke has been missing for years. His flesh was—" He swallowed hard. He shuddered. "Rotted," he managed to say. "Where do they stay? Are there more of them?"

"I guess they sleep, Miles," Sam picked up a sandwich from a covered plate. "And, yes, I'd say there are probably a lot more of them." He chewed slowly.

Wade looked at him with his face mirroring shock. He wondered: How can he do it? How can he sit there and eat! There was blood on the front of Sam's shirt.

"Were you people this calm when you did your jobs in Korea?" Wade asked.

Sam glanced at him. "Usually." He stood up, wiping his hands on blood-stained trousers. "I'll get Janey and put her in the truck. Let's break camp. I've got a feeling our luck's run out in this spot."

They had carefully reconnoitered the dry creek bed, some ten miles from where they had been attacked. They made camp in the dark, Sam gently placing the sleeping Jane Ann on blankets, covering her. He softly touched her face, wondering, as he caressed her cheek, how much time they

had left together?

Walking to the group, eating cold sandwiches as they huddled in the dark in the dry creek bed, Sam told them, "This is the way we stay alive. We eat, then move. We sleep, then move. We *do not* stay in one spot for any length of time. We pick our spots at night, and make them come to us. During the day, we take it to them, cut, slash, and run. How far are we from the Sorenson ranch?"

"About fifteen miles," Jimmy said. "To the east."

Sam smiled his warrior's smile. "Tomorrow, we destroy them."

His friends looked at each other in the night. Only Chester returned the smile.

Black Wilder glanced out a window into the night, a disgusted look on his face. "One man," he said. "Just one man stands in our way. Kill Balon—possess his mind—and his little group falls apart."

"Perhaps our people did just that this night?" Nydia said.

"No, they failed."

"Then let us take him," Nydia suggested, hopeful tone in her voice. She wanted Balon. Wanted to make love to him. And wanted him for another reason. A demon son from Balon's seed would be a force to reckon with.

Wilder slapped her on the face, knocking the witch sprawling on the floor. His eyes burned at her. She did nothing, did not move from her reclining position, for she was too afraid of Wilder and his awesome powers.

"Stupid bitch!" he hissed at her. "You know that is our last resort. You *must* know the rules of the game! You should, I've been patiently explaining them to you for centuries! Foolish woman, do you want to feel God's hand on your backside? Do you wish to spend the next thousand years crawling the earth as a bug? We *don't* break the rules. Send everything we have at Balon—yes. We can tempt him. We can try his patience; as you are trying mine. We can kill his friends. Then, after we've done all that, if he still fights us, and *only* then, with our Master's permission can we confront him. Only then, Nydia—do you understand?"

He glared down at her, his eyes yellow with rage. "You are beginning—again—to forget just who is in charge here. Perhaps you need a lesson to remind you, Nydia?"

"No!" she screamed, remembering the last time, two centuries ago, when Wilder had her punished. While Satan

rocked with laughter, the witch had been placed in a convent in France, to remain there for years, conforming to the Sisters' teachings.

It was altogether the most disgusting, degrading thing that had ever happened to her.

She still had nightmares about it.

Nydia crawled to her knees. "Please. No! Black, you are my Master here on earth. I'll do anything you ask. Anything."

Theirs was a most peculiar relationship. At times Nydia loved him. Other times, she hated him.

He wound his fingers in her black hair, twisting her head cruelly. "Don't interfere with me, Nydia. I won't tolerate it. Our Master must have a place here on earth. Those are his orders. Whitfield must be taken by us, for him. Nydia, you must learn to control your rashness. You are not a child."

"I know, Black. And I will." She unzipped his fly, fondling his penis, huge even in its softness.

"No," he pulled away, pushing her back. "Not you. Not this night."

"Please!"

"Find me a young girl. One who is soft and unskilled in love making. I would have her. Now, go!"

She rose to her feet, slipping silently through the door, blending in with the night, a black cloak wrapped around her dark gown. She was lucky to have received only a verbal scolding from the Master on earth. She knew that was true. It could have been much, much worse. Nydia recalled one rebellious witch who crossed Black Wilder. He had her powers taken from her and she was given to the Beasts.

She shuddered as she glided through the night seeking a proper young girl for the Master on earth.

She passed several homes, finally selecting one, entering without knocking. The occupants froze death-like in the darkness of the smelly home, for they knew the witch was second-in-command of this Coven. And the witch had powers none of them understood.

She took a young blonde girl by the hand, leading her to the door. "You should all be joyful," she said to the girl's parents. "This night she will please Wilder."

The mother and the father smiled and nodded their pleasure, for that was good. Their eyes glowed with pride. Their only regret was that they would not be permitted to see the penetration. In what had once been the parsonage of the Christian Church of Whitfield, now the residence of Black

Wilder and Nydia, the Master of the Coven smiled as he thought of what Balon would think once he learned his home was now the home of Satan's agent. He laughed aloud, looking up as Nydia entered with the young girl. He nodded his approval at her selection. "I remember her, Nydia. You did well." The witch smiled at his compliment. All had been forgiven.

"Make her ready to receive me," he ordered, "Let me see you work. Amuse me, Nydia—you do it so well."

Nydia dropped her robe on the floor, and the girl stared at her beauty. The heavy, rose-tipped breasts, the flat stomach, the thick, dark bush. Nydia stripped the girl, knowing this was what Wilder enjoyed—among other things. Long before this night was over, before the dark softened into day, the young girl would know full well the power and perversity of Black Wilder.

She slowly removed the girl's clothing, smiling at her high, not-yet-mature breasts. She licked her lips at the blossoming pubic hair. Wilder's eyes glowed with a yellowish light of desire as he took in young beauty.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Keri."

"Do you love me, Keri?"

"With all my heart, Master."

"Good," Wilder smiled. "Very good." He looked at Nydia. "Continue."

She pulled the girl to her, a young mouth closing around a nipple. Nydia slipped her hand over the girl's flat belly, caressing her. Her hand found the opening between her legs, wetting her.

"Take her to a bedroom," Wilder ordered. "I'll be along after a time. In the interim, Nydia. you may love her as you wish."

The witch smiled.

When they had gone, Wilder picked up the phone, and gave the operator the number of the asylum. "Loose the idiots," he said. "Then get out." He replaced the receiver in its cradle and sat for a time, smiling. This would give Balon something new to combat.

Later, Wilder entered the bedroom, standing over the bed, smiling as he listened to the moans and cries from the young girl. Nydia's hair was fanned out over the whiteness of the teenager's belly, the witch's mouth busy between widespread legs.

Wilder undressed, his huge penis dangling between his thighs, beginning to stiffen with desire. He rudely pulled Nydia from the girl and climb onto the bed.

"You know what to do," he told her.

She slipped around to the teenager's head, pinning the girl's slender arms to the bed. As Wilder began his push forward spreading the wet wetness, the girl screamed in pain.

Nydia and Wilder laughed at the child's wailings. Wilder's hugeness pushed further, ignoring the thrashing beneath him, loving the agony that writhed under him, the slender young legs jerking, flashing white in the darkness.

And one could almost hear Satan's howling.

FRIDAY - THE SECOND DAY

Jane Ann awakened in Sam's arms, for a moment not remembering where she was or what had happened to bring her to this much confusion. She felt drugged.

And then she remembered the sight of her father. His rotting flesh. His stink. His dying with a stake through his heart. Sam's holding of his leg.

She trembled, and Sam tightened his arms around her. "We'll make it, honey. With God's help, we'll make it."

"My father—"

"He's gone, now. You have to believe he did not voluntarily become one of—Them. You have to believe he's with God."

"God's on our side, Sam? Are you sure of that?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Don't ever doubt it."

She kissed him, pushing the ugliness of the previous night from her mind. "What happens today, Sam?"

"You're going to have to be strong, Janey. We're few and they are many. I need you. Today? We're going to destroy the Sorenson ranch. I think it all began there, years ago. I think Sorenson founded the cult and somehow began communicating with Satan." He slipped from her, standing up, stretching. "Anything out there, Tony?"

"Nothing, Sam. It's almost eerie with nothing moving."

"Don't worry," the minister assured him. "There will be plenty moving in a few hours. Straight to Hell!"

The caravan moved slowly through the prairie, Sam in the lead truck. Jane Ann sat beside him, by the open window, her shotgun at the ready.

Tough lady, Sam thought, stealing a glance at her profile. I hope we have a son.

Peter and Jimmy had the drag position this morning, and they were lagging a bit behind. The morning seemed so peaceful.

"Why couldn't any of us see what was happening?" Peter asked.

"Because we weren't looking, I guess," Jimmy replied. "The devil is a smart man—person—whatever the hell he is!"

They laughed, neither of them spotting the men watching

them through binoculars, watching from the reeds of a lake they would soon pass.

"They're following the old cow trail," a man said. "That means they'll soon take a right, just over the ridge. Toward us."

"And for about thirty seconds, the drag truck will be separated from the others."

"Not much time."

"Enough for what we have to do."

Five minutes later, Sam glanced in his rearview mirror, uttered a low curse, then pulled over, stopping.

Chester walked up to Sam's pickup. "What's wrong?"

"Only four trucks. Jimmy and Peter are gone."

They backtracked over the trail, slowly, nerves tense, looking. But they found nothing. No tire tracks, no sign of a struggle. Nothing.

"Where are they, Sam?" Miles asked.

"On their way to Hell. Come on, let's go."

"SAM, LOOK!" Doris screamed, pointing to a low hill just to their right.

Eyes swung, mouths opening in disgusted horror. A band of disfigured, almost non-human forms lurched down the hill toward them, waving clubs and sticks as they grunted along. They drew closer, Sam and his group recognizing the madness in them, the grotesque disfigurement making them appear almost subhuman.

Sam lifted his Thompson, clicking the SMG off safety.

"You're not going to kill them!?" Tony said.

"What choice do we have?"

"But they're not themselves, Sam! It isn't their fault. It would be wrong."

The slobbering pack of lunatics came closer, grunting, snorting, waving their clubs and sticks.

"That's just fine, Tony," Sam said. "You want to stand here and reason with them?" he pointed to the rapidly approaching band of inmates.

"They're homicidal, Tony," Wade said, "That's why the government sent them here. One of the reasons," he added.

"They're sick people, Wade," the doctor stubbornly held on to his convictions.

Sam leveled the Thompson and squeezed the trigger. The answer yammer of Chester's Greaser d the staccato. The hill was quiet except for a man moaning in pain and a woman speaking in a series of bizarre grunts of agony.

"I'll get my bag," Tony said.

"No, you won't," Sam contradicted. "Not unless you want to stay here with them—alone. We're pulling out."

The doctor met the minister's steady gaze, "You're a cold bastard!"

Sam's grin was tight. "Keep him here, Ches." He walked up the hill and put the escapees out of their multiple misery with single shots to the head.

Sam knelt down beside one of the mutants, studying him. The face was almost non-human, large bumpy nodules growing from the skin. Hands, arms, and upper torso was deformed, the skin a sickly gray color.

"You want to see this, Tony?" he called. "Hell, no, Reverend Balon!" the doctor slurred the "Reverend."

Wade met Sam on his way back from the scene of death. "He's still pretty young, Sam, and more than a bit idealistic about life."

"He'd damn well better get over it. Or he'll never make it through the next few days. I'm not carrying any dead weight."

Peter Canford screamed out his pain, refusing to deny his God. He lay naked on the floor of the parsonage, his hands and feet nailed to the floor.

Jimmy Perkins lay whimpering on the bed in what had once been Michelle's room. Strange music played, covering the now dull screaming of Peter. Heavy Eastern incense filled the room, blunting Jimmy's senses. Nydia lay naked on the bed beside the young man. The room was darkened with heavy drapes, only one small candle burned, illuminating the scene.

Nydia kissed his mouth, sliding her tongue between his lips, slipping her hand to his crotch, fondling him through his jeans.

"Look at me, Jimmy," she whispered, and he cut his eyes to her beauty. "I'm not a bad person. Oh, lots of people say bad things about me—about those like me, but they're not true. Have we hurt you, Jimmy?"

"No," he slurred the word, touching her bare shoulder, silky under his hand. His resistance weakened as he thought: No, they haven't hurt me; they've been good to me. Maybe Sam was wrong? Yes, he was pretty sure Sam was wrong.

The strange incense and the hypnotic music worked on his mind.

Nydia lifted a heavy white breast with her hand, touching the nipple to Jimmy's lips. His mouth closed around the nipple as she stripped him. He lay naked on the bed, aroused and thickening.

"We'll be good to you, Jimmy," she moaned, feigning great pleasure and passion. "I'll be good to you. I won't be like Judy."

"That bitch!" he mouthed, his tongue busy at the nipple. God! This woman was everything he ever dreamed of. To hell with Judy.

"She is a bitch," Nydia said. "She needs to be punished." She stroked him to full erection, slipping down on the bed, taking him in her mouth, asking, "Would Judy do this for you?"

"No. She said it was—dirty."

"This is not dirty. This is good. And if it feels good, what can be wrong with it? It feels good, doesn't it?"

He nodded, unable to speak. The music seemed to grow heavier in his head. The thick incense filled his nostrils, flooding his brain. Jimmy stroked her silky hair, loving the clean feel of it.

"How would you punish her?" Jimmy groaned, as Nydia's mouth worked at him, licking him.

She withdrew, kissing his belly. "Oh, I'd leave that up to you, my love. Anyway you would like, that would be fine."

She straddled him, working his hardness into her wetness, groaning with great passion. "Your God is not real, Jimmy. You can see that now, can't you?"

The words came easy to his tongue. "Yes, yes!"

"He's a fake—denying you real pleasure."

"Yes! He is a fake—He's not real."

The music mingled with the incense, drifting around him, clouding his reason. The woman straddled him, lunging on his maleness, pumping up and down, telling him how perfect he was, how there had never been a man quite like him—ever.

She spoke the ultimate blasphemy, Jimmy repeating the hideous words, as he began believing them. He had never known this much pleasure.

Nydia, impaled on his manhood, leaned forward, touching her breasts to his chest, her mouth working on his. "We'll punish Judy," she whispered. "You and I." And she told him how.

Her mouth moved to his neck, her lips pulling back, teeth

bared and needle-pointed as a snake's. Mortal beings knew nothing of this pleasure: the deliciousness of drinking warm, sweet/salty blood while in the throes of a shivering climax. She began to moan in climax as her teeth sank in Jimmy's neck, sucking a small amount of blood from him. She knew he would not notice the slight pain—until it was too late—far too late; until he was her personal servant, to do with as she pleased. Just as Sam Balon would be hers—someday.

In the living room, standing over the sobbing body of Canford, Wilder listened with extraordinary sensories to the witch. His smile was sardonic, evil, hateful. Nydia would go too far someday, he knew. Then he might have to destroy her—if the Master would permit it. But the Master was mildly amused by her antics, and Wilder knew the day would come when he himself would be replaced. And Nydia wanted his position very badly.

He pulled his attentions back to Canford. The fool still resisted, and Black was growing weary of the game. He looked at George Best. "Take him to the Undead. Tie him securely and leave him for darkness." Best licked his lips. "The young girl you had last evening?"

"Yes?"

"Are you done with her?"

Wilder smiled. Best was obsessed with anal lovemaking, male or female, it made no difference. It was written in the Book, as were the darkest thoughts of every human on earth. "You may have her for a time. After you take care of this matter." he glanced down at Canford.

Best followed his eyes. "May I—?"

"If you wish."

Best smiled.

Thirty minutes later, Peter Canford, bent over and tied, was screaming out his pain and humiliation at this insult to his masculinity.

As the caravan drew nearer to the Sorenson ranch, signs of the devil's influence became more obvious. They saw strange carvings on trees, upside-down crosses, blasphemous writings on stones, and hideous stone statues of demons.

"No wonder Karl kept this place under fence and heavy guard," Jane Ann said. The caravan had passed through a half dozen chain-link fences and guard posts just getting onto the huge ranch property.

The guards lay dead under the summer sun. They had been

careless, and Sam was a master of the ambush, showing the others he could be a cold killing machine.

The guards on the close perimeter of the ranch house fell to Sam's knife, one by one, as his friends lay on a low ridge, watching him work.

"Why don't we just blow up the place?" Miles asked. "Like you all did the first ranch?" he looked at Chester.

"Sam wants to inspect the Sorenson house. He thinks this is the Cult headquarters; where it began."

Gunfire stopped the conversation, followed by a series of explosions. They watched the bunkhouse disintegrate under the fury of a dozen sticks of dynamite. Nothing inside could have lived through that destructive blast of TNT.

"Let's go!" Chester yelled, running for the trucks.

But it was almost over by the time Sam's group reached the yard. The minister had been a one man death squad. He had gunned down the people in the house as they ran into the yard after the first explosion.

"You!" Sorenson spat the word at Sam. He glared up at the preacher through eyes that mirrored hate. His hands clutched at his stomach, perforated with .45 caliber holes.

"Me," Sam said calmly.

"They'll get you," Sorenson spat up blood, "You can't kill us all."

"I can try," Sam lifted the muzzle of the Thompson and squeezed the trigger. He looked at Chester. "You people stay loose. Anything that moves, shoot it. I'm going in the house. I've got a bad feeling about that barn, so wait for me before you try going in."

He walked into the house, knowing what he would find. He was not disappointed. The home was a repository for everything evil. Chains and whips and torture instruments lay everywhere. Contrivances of sexual perversion could be seen in every room. Huge artificial penises, torture racks, and much more. The sight disgusted Sam. He went from room to room, setting the house on fire.

As smoke billowed around him, Sam stepped out on the porch, watching Chester. The man moved from body to body sprawled in the yard, a .45 in his hand, putting one round in the head of each devil worshipper. Sam glanced at Wade, watching the man work. The editor's lips were pressed together, his face pale.

Sam knew Wade had never killed before this day. He stepped off the porch. "Don't leave any alive. Kill them, then

burn them." He walked toward the barn.

"Wait!" Wade called. "I'm coming with you."

The minister's eyes were cool, a half-smile on his lips. "Then be well cautioned, Wade. What you'll probably see in there, if they are in there, is something you'll have to live with for the rest of your life."

"aking everything into consideration," the man retorted, "that might not be all that long a time."

"Then come on."

Wade looked behind him one more time. He looked a little ill; he could not take his eyes off Chester, or the manner in which the head exploded as the .45 caliber slug smashed through brain. The bodies seemed to dance on the ground under the impact. He had known Chester all his life, considering him to be one of the finest men in Fork County. An elder in the Church.

"You get used to it after a while," Sam said "At least, I did. And I think Chester did, too. In World War II. It's something every combat vet has to live with. Once a person has learned how to survive, and what must be done, that instinct lies just below the surface, very thinly covered with civilized veneer."

Sam swung open the doors to the barn. A stale musty odor struck them. The odor of evil. The barn was dark.

"God!" Wade said.

"Godless," Sam corrected. "Like those people lying dead in the yard."

"Why don't we just burn this barn down?" Wade asked, as the men stepped into the darkness.

"Because I want to meet those inside. And beat them."

Outside, Chester had moved his people around the barn, covering all exits. Only one of the men stood at ready: Jane Ann, with the slug-loaded shotgun in her hands. Faye, Anita, and Doris had received a couple of hours of instruction in the use of firearms, but they were not yet mentally ready to use them. Killing is entirely a state of mind, with very little physical effort required, and with most people, it takes time to prepare the mind for what society deems wrong. The women were still in a mild state of shock at the sight of so many dead bodies, and the seemingly ruthless manner in which Chester had disposed of the wounded.

Sam handed Wade his stake, picking up a pitchfork. His smile was hard. "This won't leave much room for doubt."

Wade moved to his left, away from Sam. A bit of hay and dust suddenly drifted down the loft. An almost inaudible

creak of timber.

The barn doors slammed shut behind the men, plunging the barn into darkness. Only a few shards of dusty sunlight leaked through cracks in the barn walls.

"Sam?"

"I heard. Coming." The minister walked through the gloom. At Wade's side, he looked up at the disturbed dust filtering from the loft. "Back up," he whispered, lifting the Thompson.

When Wade was out of the way, Sam pulled the trigger and held it back.

Splinters flew in all directions. Dust poured down from the loft as the slugs ripped through thin wood flooring. A howling, once-human form hurtled downward, crashing on the barn's lower level. The thing lurched to its feet, screaming, its yellow eyes glowing in the semidarkness. Still-smoking bullet holes leaked putrid odors from the body.

There was no blood left in Glen Haskell.

"Father Haskell!" Wade shouted.

The thing offered no sign of recognition. Haskell's hands resembled claws as he moved toward the men, his mouth open, exposing fanged teeth, a thick red tongue. Unable to push words out of its mouth, the creature uttered animal sounds. Haskell howled, then charged.

Sam lifted the pitchfork chest high and the ex-priest ran into the tines, the needle-sharp points driving through lungs and heart and out his back. Filth flew from his mouth as clawlike fingers wound around the wooden handle.

Sam forced the Undead to the floor and savagely drove the pitchfork in and out of its body. Haskell died on the manure covered floor, wallowing in animal excrement. His mouth opened and closed, teeth snapping, snarling sounds from his dying throat fading away into silence.

"SAM!" Wade yelled.

The minister spun around. "Open the doors," he shouted. "Chester! Open the doors—let the light in!"

In the murkiness of the barn, before Chester could throw open the doors, Sam saw Wade backed up against a wall, a small Beastlike creature stalking him, heavy, hair-covered arms held up, claws working as the editor fumbled for the gun at his side.

Sam tore off the cap from a canteen of Holy Water and hurled it at the Beast. The creature screamed in anguish as the blessed water hit its body, searing the hairy flesh. It spun, and Sam recognized it.

Max Steiner's youngest boy, Ralph. "Dear Lord!" Sam said, disbelief in his eyes. The Steiner boy was half a Beast, from the waist up, as if the transformation had somehow failed to work.

The results were hideous to look upon.

The doors to the barn were thrown open, light pouring into the cavernous building. The half-Beast screamed at the raw light from God, throwing up its arms to protect its eyes.

Wade shot the half-Beast with his .38. But the .38 did not have the knock-down power of Sam's .45. The small creature fell backward against a stall wall, shuddered, and charged at Sam. The minister jerked his .45 from the holster, leveled the muzzle chest high, and pulled the trigger three times. The creature flipped backward as if hit with a mighty foot and bounced off a wall, dead.

Sam ran to Wade's side, jerking him toward the door. He shoved him outside. "Get out of here!"

Sam backed out of the barn as snarling rolled to him, coming from closed stalls. Roaming Beasts had chosen the Sorenson ranch to hide during the day. Sam slammed a fresh clip in the Thompson and emptied it into the barn, into dusty forms. Screaming filled the barn as Sam yelled over his shoulder, "Chester! Cocktails—now!"

Before leaving camp, the men had prepared a dozen Molotov cocktails, whiskey bottles filled with gasoline and a small bit of flour, with a cloth fuse sticking from the top. The flour, wet, would stick to whatever it struck, burning like napalm.

Chester threw three of the bottles into the barn, the flammable liquid exploding as they smashed against the inside wall, turning the barn into an inferno. As the Beasts attempted to escape the flames, they were shot down.

The cocktails, igniting with the dust particles in the barn, acted as a super bomb, blowing the building apart, the walls and roof caving in. Some . . . thing, some non-human form, not a Beast, but yet not a human, crawled from the broken beams and burning walls into the sunlight, its entire body ablaze. It screeched and howled in the light, drumming its bare feet on the ground, then died.

Anita, crouched behind a pickup truck, vomited. The nausea was infectious—as it almost always is—and many of the others followed suit. After a moment, there was heavy coughing and mumbled apologies.

Sam jarred them all when he roared, "Burn the bodies.

Drag them in a pile, pour gas on them and burn them!"

When the bodies had been dragged into a makeshift funeral pyre, saturated with gas, and blazing, Sam said, "Wade! Take the point, head straight for Little River Ranch, and don't slow up. We've got the High of combat going now, so we're going in shooting. Move it!"

Jimmy Perkins screamed out his pleasure as he beat the naked Judy with a piece of rope, marking her white body with red welts, punishing her as Nydia had promised him he could. He fell on her, working out his rage, abusing her with his fists.

"It's always the same," Wilder said to Nydia. They watched their newest convert from a window of the parsonage. "The play never changes, only the characters. Humans never change. They always want what is forbidden them by their God. Centuries of it is beginning to bore me. Of course, he'll sodomize her next. How droll."

And Jimmy did just that, pulling his ex-girlfriend to her knees, mounting her. She screamed her pain at his sudden intrusion.

"That's why they are humans, is it not?" Nydia asked moodily. "And is that not the reason we are here?"

Wilder looked at her, irritation in his expression. "*Must* I endure another of your deathless lectures on human behavior?" The witch laughed, a dark brooding bark of little humor. "I seem to recall you enjoy the rear passage, Black."

"But of course," he smiled. "Our Master does not condemn it."

"Now who is lecturing whom?"

His smile broadened as Judy began enjoying the sensation of pain/pleasure.

"Animals," Wilder said. "All humans are but a cut above the animals."

"You bore me, Black. Perhaps you've been here on earth too long?"

"I was thinking the same thing, my dear." And then he was gone, vanishing without a trace.

Wilder was much older than Nydia, and much more proficient at his craft, but Nydia was no longer afraid of him. She had a plan. And she had talked with her Master about that plan, and he had agreed, chuckling.

She walked into her bedroom, leaving behind her the muffled sounds of pain and pleasure in the front yard, being

witnessed by a crowd of Satan-worshippers that had gathered to watch. They urged Jimmy on.

Sitting on her bed, the witch projected her thoughts to the Master, and he, laughing, gave her permission, adding some thoughts of his own.

"Balon!" she licked her lips. "But how is it possible?"

All things are possible, the deep rumbling filled her head.

"But, Black-?"

He wishes to return to me, so let him be destroyed and have his wish. Balon will do it. Oh, what a coup this will be! What a child will spring from it!

And the rumblings changed into dark laughter.

"But how?" Nydia questioned. "When? And afterward?"

I will tell you, he spoke to her.

And she smiled at his words filling her head.

The caravan had come upon yet another band of roaming lunatics from the asylum, blocking the trail to Little River Ranch, waving clubs and drooling nonsense at the trucks and their occupants.

Then they attacked, leaving the men and women no choice. They opened fire. Doctor King reluctantly raised his carbine and squeezed the trigger. Afterward, he openly and unashamedly wept.

"We'll pay for this," he said to no one in particular. "In some way, someday, we'll pay." And the caravan moved on, leaving the prairie to deal with the lumpy bodies sprawled in the knee-high grass.

The trucks seemed to snarl out of nowhere, hitting the Little River ranch house at three o'clock in the afternoon. Herman heard them coming, roaring in. He rose from the bed where he had been loving the young girl, Jean.

"What's that?" the teenager questioned, still jerking on the bed. "Come back! Don't leave me yet—I got to come!"

Herman ran naked to the front door, kicking sleeping people out of his way. Those in the throes of fornication did not look up. He threw open the door in time to see a sputtering stick of dynamite taped to a quart bottle of gasoline come at him. It was the last thing he witnessed on this earth as the gas and dynamite exploded, ripping the cowboy to shredded meat, demolishing the living room, setting the house on fire.

Pip and Mack ran out the back door and were met by Chester's yammering Greaser. More dynamite was thrown through the windows, and the house turned into crumpled ruins.

Using Molotov cocktails, Sam set every building on the grounds blazing. Anything or anyone attempting to escape was shot.

Pat Zagone ran screeching from the burning bunkhouse, where she had been entertaining a half dozen men. Her long hair was on fire. A thought wormed its way into Sam's brain: If the devil rules a fiery pit, why then, are these servants of his screaming from the flames?

He had no answer.

He shot her.

A Beast lunged from the burning barn. Jane Ann lifted the shotgun, booming off three rounds, stopping the creature flat in its clawed tracks, flinging it backward, to lie flopping and dying on the ground.

The teenager, Jean, slipped from the back bedroom of the destroyed home, running naked through the creek, screaming curses at her attackers.

She ran through the grass, fleet as a young colt, running out of rifle range.

No one noticed just who it was, her cursing not audible above the crackling flames and the rattle of gunfire.

The heat from the burning buildings drove Sam and his followers back. They stood on a low hill, watching the buildings burn to the ground.

Jean lay panting in the grass, a half mile from the scene of destruction, cursing at her attackers, snarling low. She had a feeling in her guts that she had better find a place to hide until this was over, one way or the other. She could always come back, pretending she had been taken away against her will.

She smiled, her face pressed against the earth. Yes, that was the way to handle this.

Yes, a voice filled her head, and she knew who was speaking to her. That is the way. Hide, until I call you. There will be another day, another time

Sam looked around him as the sun began its sinking for this day. It was over. His group looked at one another, each one aware of the evil that would soon be searching for them—in the night.

"Let's camp in the falls," Chester suggested. "It's the one

place I can think of that's easy to defend. And it's not far away."

"Let's roll it," Sam said.

Sam made love to Jane Ann as if this were their last time together. They were far from the others, behind the tiny falls, letting the spray of mist engulf them as they lay naked, locked together.

After a time, they were still in each other's arms, listening to the pounding of their hearts gradually slow. They bathed and soaped each other in the cool water of the falls, gentle in their touchings.

"Sam?"

"Uh-huh?"

"You made me pregnant this time."

"You can't know for sure." But there was pride in his heart at the thought.

She smiled. "Yes, I can."

Just as full dark enveloped the land, they walked back to the half circle of trucks, slowly, holding hands as they walked.

"The lovers return," Doris said with a smile. She was frying meat over a campfire, and both Sam and Jane Ann realized how hungry they were.

Squatting down beside the small fire, Sam asked, "How are you holding up?"

"I'll make it," she said. "But Anita—" she shook her head. "I don't know. You can only live with so much terror, Sam. After that—" She shrugged.

Jane Ann fixed a sandwich. "I'll go sit with her." She walked off toward the woman sitting alone by a pickup.

"Point is, Sam," Doris said, spearing a piece of meat with a fork, putting it on a piece of bread, handing it to Sam, "How are *you* holding up?"

"Better than most, I imagine," Sam replied. "Now that I have the rhythm of what we're doing."

"Explain that, please."

Others had gathered around the cook fire, to eat and to listen to the minister.

"It doesn't take one long to slip back into a combat role. Survival is the most basic of all human emotions. Throwback to the caves, I suppose."

"Do you enjoy combat, Sam?" Tony asked.

Sam chewed in silence for a moment. He rose to his feet,

picking up his Thompson. "I understand it," he said, then walked into the darkening night.

The Godless were becoming much more cautious in their approach. Only a dry whisper of movement warned Sam they were coming. That, and his own senses, working overtime. Sam smiled his grim smile, anticipating combat; another showdown.

The pickups had been pulled into a half circle, toward the prairie. The falls and the high ground behind them. The Godless had to come at them from the front. Each pickup had, in addition to regular headlights, spotlights. The women carried long, six-cell flashlights. They all crouched by the trucks, waiting.

"They're out there, aren't they?" Jane Ann whispered.

"Yes," Sam caressed her arm. "Get ready for a rush."

The dry movement rustled closer, the night breeze bringing the sounds and scent of Them to the half circle. Nerves became tighter, breathing shallowed. As is always the case—and a combat-experienced person can pick it up—there was a slight pause before the charge.

"LIGHTS!" Sam yelled, and the prairie was suddenly bright with harsh light.

The Godless were caught by surprise. Less than fifty yards from the tight circle of trucks, the worshippers of Satan were momentarily blinded.

"FIRE!" Sam shouted.

The night was torn with gunfire: the stutter of Chester's Greasegun and the powerful roaring of Sam's Thompson. The sharp crack of high-powered rifles, and the booming of shotguns.

The attackers were armed, but they had been too anxious, caught by surprise. They were cut to bloody shards by bullets and buckshot. Medallions sparkled in the artificial light. Evil eyes flashed hate at the Godly. Blood leaped from gaping chest wounds and torn stomachs, smearing the night with thick stickiness.

Sam had told his people: "Don't try to be a hero. Fire at the thickest part of the body, between the neck and the waist."

Hoarse bellowing filled the night; painful cries penetrated the gunfire, adding a period to a life sentence.

"Finish them!" Sam yelled. "Shut them up!" He put aside his Thompson for an M-1. Chester did the same.

The others stood quietly, watching the minister and the

church elder finish the grisly night's work.

Then the prairie was silent.

"Lights out," Sam ordered. "Check weapons. Stand easy but ready. They'll be back as soon as they regroup."

"Colonel Travis speaks," Doris quipped, breaking the tension.

Sam grinned at her courage and pluckiness. "Miles?" Sam said. "You take the left perimeter. I'll take the right. The rest of you people, take a break, try to relax."

"Sam?" Miles said, exasperation in his voice, "What in the hell is a perimeter? I was in supply, not in the Commandos."

The preacher chuckled. "I'll go into combat with you anytime, Miles. A perimeter is your designated watch area. Anything to the left of that tree is yours; to the right is mine."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"Audie Murphy, he ain't," Doris said.

"Silence, woman!" her husband warned.

"Yes, dear," she laughed. "My, isn't he becoming assertive?"

The good-natured bantering ceased as Anita began shaking uncontrollably, sobbing into her hands.

"Shock," Tony said. "I've been waiting for her to break down. It was just a matter of time. Wade, put her in the back of your pickup. Wrap her up in blankets, elevate her feet, and stay with her."

"I can't take anymore of this!" Anita screamed out. "Dear God—let's run. Just get away from *here!*"

Anita fought the hands that tried to help her, striking out at anyone until her husband and Tony managed to pin her to the ground, wrap her in blankets, and place her in the bed of the pickup. Wade stayed with her, holding her.

Sam looked at his wife, her profile beautiful in the moonlight. "How are you doing?"

"I'll make it," she touched his face. "But I know how Anita feels. I just haven't allowed myself the luxury of breaking down."

He bent down, kissing her mouth. "Get some rest."

She looked up at him, all the love in the world shining through her eyes. "Will they be back?"

"Yes. This time it will be the Undead. Their tactics don't change."

She shuddered in the warm prairie breeze.

Miles' shotgun blasted the night. Four quick booms.

"Lights!" Sam yelled, grabbing a stake, running toward the

firing.

Walter Addison staggered to his feet, thrown on his back by the slugs from the shotgun. Smoking holes covered his chest. He grinned grotesquely, making grunting noises past a tongue that seemed too large for his mouth. His face was pale, eyes shining yellow with evil.

Sam held out his silver cross. Addison hissed at him, his foul breath corrupting the air. Undead stepped toward Sam, unafraid of the cross..

Chester was locked in a deadly struggle with another of the Undead. Wade ran to help him, shouting for Jane Ann to watch over Anita. Miles ran to Sam's side and tossed a canteen of Holy Water on Addison. The creature howled in pain. Miles looked at the canteen of blessed water.

"Stuff works," he said. Addison turned to one side in his pain and Sam lunged at him, driving a stake into his chest.

A wretched screeching cut the night, an un-Godly sound from the mouth of a man who had forsaken his God, his Maker. Sam worked the stake deeper into his chest, forcing the man to the ground, pinning him there until he was dead.

Addison trembled as the evil in him died.

Forms scurried away, ratlike in the darkness, hissing as they ran.

Miles capped the canteen, then looked at the container.

"Powerful stuff," he said dryly. "I wonder what would happen if you drank it?"

SATURDAY - THE THIRD DAY

Whitfield lay quiet in the weekend sun. No one moved on the streets. To a passerby—if there were any—only the ruined churches would be out of the ordinary. Everything else would seem normal—almost.

Nydia slept soundly, Jimmy sprawled naked by her side. He was—without caring—her slave, hers to do whatever she wished done.

Black Wilder sat in the living room, sipping tea, his thoughts, like the room, dark. Balon and his followers were ruining everything; wreaking havoc in Fork County. They had to be stopped—must be stopped!—but stopped within the rules. But how?

Balon did not behave as a minister should. Just this morning, early, at dawn, Balon had destroyed another ranch, killing all those at the ranch. Then he had, along with the others, methodically and cold-bloodedly shot down another dozen of the inmates from the asylum. Not like a minister. Not like a minister at all. Wilder had to smile. Quite a man, Sam Balon.

Wilder was also aware of the change in Nydia. The silly bitch seemed not to realize that Wilder knew of her communications with the Master. The Master had come to him during the night, in the quiet, telling him of her plans and schemes. And, to the Master's surprise, Wilder had agreed—providing all else failed. He was weary of earth; weary of the game; ready to go home. Let the bitch worry with it. She, too, would soon discover what a tiresome job it was, and how unrewarding.

So Nydia had a plan to make Balon her own, for a few hours, to mate with him, to produce a lemon. All right. So be it. If all else failed.

In homes around Whitfield, members of the Coven were awakening. Fathers were mounting daughters, engaging in grunting incestuous love. Mothers were caressing sons. Sisters and brothers were copulating.

The whimpering cries of those who still clung to the Love of the one God was heard in basements as the day's tortures began.

In the darkness of their homes, the followers of Satan were

performing their appointed tasks. Yes, Whitfield was normal. But not by God's standards.

And in the darkness of a basement in a ranch house in Fork County, Peter Canford slept behind a couch, on the dirty floor. He waited for the night to carry out his orders: to kill.

By midafternoon they stood watching the fourth ranch of the day burn to the ground. Paul Merlin's Rocking Chair. Sam and Chester, using M-1s, picked off the Satan-worshippers as they tried to escape the flames. Smoke from the burning buildings spiralled upward in greasy plumes. The prairie winds sighed lonely through the vastness of Fork County.

tried to escape the flames. Smoke from the burning buildings spiralled upward in greasy plumes. The prairie winds sighed lonely through the vastness of Fork County.

Chester squatted on one knee, his face dirty and haggard. "I stopped counting at three hundred. And we still have Whitfield ahead of us."

Sam's rifle barked, a lone figure stumbled, falling to the ground, screaming curses as he tried to get to his feet. He died cursing God.

"Sam?" Jane Ann said, standing by his side. "Tomorrow is Sunday—can we rest then?"

"No. Tomorrow is the one day we can fight them with God guiding us. They can't move on His day, but we can."

They were not the same people as they had been only a few days before. They would never be the same; those that would live through this ordeal. These men and women had toughened—hardened, and their faces bore that fact.

Anita had found some inner strength buried deep within her and had shaken off the shock of the night before. She had killed this day, killed with a determination and cold ferocity that amazed her husband.

She had said, "I know now it's the only way. We can't run from it; we've got to destroy them—all of them, or be destroyed. These people are not our friends; not the people we knew and grew up with. These people are no longer human. They are rabid animals, and you can't show sympathy to a rabid animal."

Sam gathered his people and exited the scene of death and fire and blood. This night, he knew, they would have to be extremely careful, for from dusk to midnight, Satan's followers would come at them with all the force they could muster.

Chester led them to a half destroyed old cinder block house built on a flat plain. The house commanded the prairie from its ridge. By late afternoon, with at least three hours of day left, they had made ready for the night's evil.

Anyone coming for them would have to come to get them. The field of fire belonged to Sam and his people.

The trucks were safely parked behind the walls of the old home. Each person knew his or her position and what they had to do. Cans of gasoline had been placed around the ridge, ready to be set ablaze by Molotov cocktails. Weapons were cleaned and checked. They had all eaten, the fires doused. They napped in the waning hours of day.

They would need all their strength this night.

At full dark, the rolling prairie became alive with evil: on foot, on horseback, in cars and trucks and jeeps. The un-Godly sought out the Godly. The Godless had no tactics except to charge, they did this in waves, running up the hill. During a break in the firing, Chester said, "This takes me back some years, to the Pacific. The Japs would come at us just like this, screaming, in wave after wave. We'd stack them up like cord-wood and still they'd come at us." He glanced at his wife. Her face was streaked with dirt and gunpowder. "You all right, honey?"

She forced a grin. "I'll make it."

"Good girl. Hang in there."

And then there was no more time for talk, as the night filled with two-legged evil, running up the hill, toward the home, straight into the guns of God.

"Hit the gas!" Sam yelled, and cocktails went spinning through the air, igniting the gas cans with dynamite taped to them. The earth shook under the impact.

The air became thick with the acrid stink of gunsmoke, gas fumes, smoke, and the stench of searing, burning flesh. Hearing was momentarily impaired by the booming, yammering, cracking of weapons. Nostrils became insulted, eyes teared and reddened.

Abruptly, an eerie silence fell on the prairie.

"What's happening?" Wade called.

Sam glanced at his watch, the luminous hands glowing. "It's over. It's one minute past midnight. They can't move on God's day."

SUNDAY - THE FOURTH DAY

"There is something that bothers me, Sam," Chester said, screwing a new barrel on his Grease-gun, discarding the old warped barrel. Breakfast over, the nine relaxed, cleaning weapons, filling old whiskey bottles with gasoline, making Molotov cocktails. Making ready for war on God's day.

Sam looked up from his work. "They have access to explosives just as we do. They could have blown us out of any place we've been. Why didn't they?"

"Because they want me alive," the minister said. "For more than one reason, I think." He didn't elaborate. "It would be quite a coup for them, taking me."

Jane Ann touched his hand. "Nydia?"

Sam nodded. "Yes." He rose to his feet. "Let's take a drive, folks." "Where?" Tony asked.

The minister smiled that grim warrior's smile. "Whitfield."

Up a slight grade, and Whitfield came into view. Sam stopped his little convoy and got out of his pickup, standing in the center of the state road. His group gathered around.

All were visibly nervous, Wade asking, "Are we just going straight in, Sam? There must be two thousand people down there!"

Sam looked down at Whitfield. "We're going in just like the Cavalry. One pass through town. We are going to burn down the town, but not today. We're just going to give them a little taste of what's in store for them."

"And they're going to sit back and let us do it?" Miles asked. "Without a fight?"

"No." Sam shook his head. "They'll fight. They're on home ground and they can. So let's be quick about this. Hit hard, then get out. Cut, slash, and run. Don't bunch up, but do stay in a convoy."

"We scare them," Chester said. "Show them we're not afraid of them. Is that it?"

"Exactly, Ches."

"I feel as though someone, or some *thing* is watching us," Doris said.

"We are being watched," Sam affirmed her suspicions. "Just

remember this, those . . . things down there are very much afraid of us. We've taken everything they can throw at us, and we've shoved it right down their throats. Now we're taking the fight to them, so let's do it.

"I'll take the lead truck, with Janey driving. Wade, you and Anita second. Miles and Doris third. Chester, you take the drag with Faye driving and Tony up front. Okay? Let's do it."

The convoy rolled into Whitfield at forty miles per hour, turning Royal Street into fire and smoke. They cut north, up Branford, tossing Molotov cocktails and dynamite, the gas-filled bottles exploding against houses, on automobiles parked along the road.

But Sam was unable to toss the cocktail at the parsonage. Wilder stood on the steps, Nydia at his side, and some force from their eyes prevented him from hurling the gas bomb. They stood smiling at Sam, Wilder's arms folded across his chest, quietly acquiescing to the minister's move. The eyes of the witch and the warlock seemed to say: Very well, this round is yours, Balon. But the fight is a long way from being over.

Sam's neighbor and onetime friend, Max Steiner ran into the street, screaming curses at Sam. The preacher tossed the cocktail at him, engulfing the man in a ball of fire.

The convoy had stopped in front of the parsonage, all of them seemingly mesmerized by Wilder and Nydia. Chester emptied a full clip from his Greaser at them, but the bullets seemed not to touch either of them. They laughed at him. "I don't believe this!" Chester said in astonishment. "To hell with both of you!" Then he smiled at his words, his grin fading as Nydia arrogantly waved at him.

Chester could not resist giving them the middle finger.

They burst out laughing.

The convoy rolled on, up Cottonwood Street, leaving behind them death and fire. The Satan-worshippers ran into the street and the convoy rolled over them, leaving crushed bodies and a trail of crimson from the tires.

"Let's get out of here," Sam yelled. "Don't stop for anybody or anything. Head for the Dig site."

Jane Ann drove the pickup expertly, dodging and weaving through the possessed town. "What do we do there?" she shouted.

"Stakes!"

"The foolish, brave man," Wilder complimented Sam.

"What I would not give to have him with us."

Nydia cupped her breasts with her hands, feeling the nipples grow in excitement. "I will have a son by Balon. What a demon he would be—strong and fearless."

"That, my dear, is a very good idea. I must warn you, Nydia: I have heard your conversations with the Master."

"And I yours, Black."

And the devil then spoke, "You will, Black, if necessary, give your life to see that her wish is fulfilled. I *will* have offspring from Balon's seed. I have spoken."

"You heard?" Wilder asked.

"I heard. Black? He is going to destroy the site."

"I know."

"What can we do?"

"Nothing. This is God's day."

The nine went from trailer to trailer at the Dig, until the area was filled with the putrid odor of Undead finally dying.

They drove their stakes into sleeping demons. It was a grisly morning in Fork County as the stakes pierced the hearts of the Godless, the howling cries echoing over the rock circle with its carving, over the valley of The Digging. Blood splattered the walls as heavy strokes from hammers drove the wooden points into flesh, past bone, smashing into pumping hearts, ending the evil. Wailing of the damned ripped into living ears as sweat from the Godly dripped onto the Godless, the perspiration hissing as it touched anathematized flesh. Bloody hands gripped the stakes as they were driven into chests; stinking breath fouled the musty air of the closed trailers.

Outside, the devil's rage was vented in the sky as lightning flashed across the suddenly darkened sky. Thunder boomed in cascading waves. The stink of sulphur lay about the fenced-in Dig. The Believers had to shout to be heard.

"The tablet?" Wade yelled. "Where is it?"

"Not here," Sam returned the shout. "I'm sure of that. Wilder would have it well hidden."

"SAM!" Jane Ann screamed.

The preacher spun around. Beasts and lunatics were moving across the Dig. The Beasts could move on this day, for they knew nothing of God, their tiny brains incapable of comprehending something so vast.

The Beasts and the lunatics died on this day. In the pouring rain, under the cover of low, dark clouds, during the blinding

pops of lightning and the rolling crash of thunder, Sam's people picked up their guns.

The smell of the Undead dying was soon overpowered by the stench of gunsmoke as they emptied weapons into the charging forces of Satan. The Beasts and the crazed possessed snarled and snapped and howled until they were driven away, leaving behind their dead.

Sam and Chester followed them, recklessly close, firing their automatic weapons. A few of the Beasts and the lunatics made their escape.

As abruptly as it began, the carnage was over. The sky was clear and clean, as if it had been swept by the hand of God. The blazing ball of sun beat down on the site, steaming the puddles of water.

The nine carefully checked the trailers for any Undead they might have missed. They were all dead, lying in grotesque, misshapen, nonrecognizable lumps.

They looked for the tablet for over an hour, finally giving up their search.

"Let's go," Sam said. "Let's get out of here."

An hour of daylight left on God's day. Three ranches had been destroyed this afternoon. Sam and his people were bordering on exhaustion.

"Sam?" Chester called. "There's some . . . thing in this shed. One of Them, I think."

The minister picked his way through the bodies littering the back yard, the muzzle of his SMG still emitting a faint finger of smoke. Carefully, he eased open the door to the shed. He recognized the boots protruding from behind a stack of boxes. Peter Canford. "Get me a stake," he told Chester.

"Sam?"

"There is no other way, Ches. He's an Undead, now. Keep the others away from here." The screaming from the shed filled the air. The hard pounding as Sam drove the stake into the chest of what had been his friend cracked under the late afternoon sun. The now familiar stench drifted out the open shed door.

Silence.

Sam stepped from the shed, his hands and shirt stinking from the corruption that had erupted from each hammer stroke. He looked up at the sky.

"God, give us the strength to finish this fight. For we are tired, God. We are so tired of killing." They walked to their trucks, exhaustion evident with each step.

They did not see the eyes that followed them as they drove away. They did not hear the heavy breathing or the low snarling from the man hiding in the ravine behind the ranch house.

In their weariness, they had left someone alive.

MONDAY - THE FIFTH DAY

Jane Ann turned in her sleep, pressing close to the flesh of Sam under the blankets, loving the feel of him next to her. Through sleepy eyes, she watched Tony outlined against the pink horizon, the butt of his carbine resting on one hip. She kissed Sam on the cheek, then eased from him, dressing in the coolness of dawn. She walked to the fire, where Faye was making breakfast. The smell of coffee drifted about the camp, rousing the others.

"I don't believe I would have liked the life of a pioneer woman," Faye smiled a good morning. "Give me a modern kitchen anytime."

They were camped by a small lake, and ail longed to wash away the stink of yesterday.

After breakfast, they took turns in the lake, ladies first, with men standing guard, then the men took a quick bath. Back in camp, Jane Ann noticed gray in Sam's hair, gray that had not been there a week before.

"How many more ranches in this part of Fork?" Sam asked.

"Four. And one farm. After that we will have completed the circle."

"Then we destroy the town," Sam said.

One rifle shot rang out, the slug catching Faye in the center of the back, severing the spinal cord. The slug splintered off into several pieces, hitting lung and heart. She pitched forward, dead in the dirt.

Screaming out his rage, Chester grabbed his M-1, running to the edge of the camp. He triggered off a full clip, eight rounds. A faint moaning could be heard from out in the plains, a hundred yards from the camp.

Sam wrapped the woman in a blanket as he listened to Chester curse. The man was striking someone—or some Thing. He walked back into camp, half dragging and half carrying his daughter, Ruby. She screamed at her father, fighting him, until he backhanded her to the ground. She crawled to her knees, shouting curses at him. Chester hit her with his fist on the point of the chin, knocking her to the ground, stunned.

The man was openly weeping. "It was Jack," he sobbed. "He killed his own mother."

"Pray!" Ruby laughed at Sam as he stood over the shallow grave of Faye. "Pray, you mother fucker!"

Sam tried to ignore her, continuing his prayer for the soul of Faye Stokes.

Ruby screeched her laughter, shouting profanities at the diminishing band of Believers. "Hey, Preacher! When you get through with soul-savin' shit, come over here for a minute. I need a good fuck!"

They all tried to ignore her.

Sam uttered the last Amen, then picked up a shovel. "I don't like this, Ches. She should be cremated. You know what might happen."

"No! I won't have her burned."

Shaking his head, knowing all too well what would probably happen with the body, Sam covered the grave with earth.

The earth patted in place, making but a small mound on the prairie, Chester turned to look at his daughter, bound at ankles and wrists. "Help her, Sam," he asked.

"I don't know if I can." He wanted to add: I don't know if I really want to.

"Please try." There were tears in the man's eyes.

"I don't know the rite of exorcism, Ches. All I have is prayer and Holy Water. If that doesn't work, then what?"

"I'll kill her!" the father said. "I won't have that," he pointed to his daughter, "walking God's earth."

"Hey, Doc King—Tony, baby," she called. "You're a good-lookin' guy. You don't have a woman out here, do you? Untie me and I'll show you what *my* God says is good. I'll give you some pussy, baby."

Tony shook his head in disgust. "I remember my father treating her for mumps. I can't stand this." He picked up his rifle. "I'll take the watch."

Sam knelt down beside her, knowing in his guts it wasn't going to work. This was no cult full of amateurs; this was the real thing, with the devil overseeing every move.

He put his hand on her forehead and she jerked away from his touch, trying to bite him, white teeth flashing. Her screaming drowned out Sam's first attempt at prayer.

Chester knelt down. "Ruby? Ruby, won't you try to help us help you?"

"Fuck you!" she snarled at her father.

Sam touched her forehead with a tiny bit of Holy Water. She screamed in pain as the blessed water hissed and bubbled

on her flesh.

Sam prayed.

The girl threw herself about, straining at the ropes that bound her. Filth sprang from her mouth, matching Sam's intensity at prayer.

He sprinkled Holy Water on her forehead, wincing at her screaming.

Still she cursed him.

At the end of an hour, Sam was near exhaustion and no closer, he felt, to expelling the demons from the girl. She showed no signs of giving in; still as strong as when they began.

Sam rose to his feet, his knees aching. Ruby lay on the ground, cursing Sam, her father, God, and everything connected with Christianity. She spat at Sam and her father.

"I can't do anything more, Ches. I just can't."

Ruby laughed at them. An evil, mocking laugh.

Her father knelt down. "Ruby, you're part of me. Won't you please try to help yourself?"

She spat in his face and laughed at him.

Chester pulled his pistol from leather, his face, dripping with saliva, was dark with rage.

Sam stopped his gun-held hand. "That won't do any good, Ches. They'll still have her soul."

The father's eyes were both sad and grim. "You mean—?"

"Go on. Take the people out of here. I'll do it. Jack, too."

"Leave Faye alone, Sam."

"All right, if you say so. Go on."

The prairie was quiet after Chester and the others left. Sam stood over the teenager, a stake in his hand. She looked up at him, but her eyes were not afraid.

"Last chance, Ruby."

"Hey, preacher—wouldn't you like some young pussy? I give good half and half, too. Half fuck, half suck."

Sam lifted the stake, praying for guidance, hoping God would guide his hand. The sky darkened, clouds dipping close to the earth.

The minister drove the stake into the chest of the girl. Lightning flicked across the sky as Sam pushed the stake deeper into her, piercing the young heart held captive by Satan.

Ruby lay dead on the ground, her hands clutching the shaft of the long stake.

Sam looked at the grave of Faye Stokes. "I'll see you again, Faye—but you won't really know me.

He walked into the prairie, looking for Jack's body. When he left the sea of rippling, knee-high grass, a stake had been driven into the chest of Jack Stokes. The body still writhed on the ground.

Four ranches, a farm, and a dozen more inmates from the asylum went down that day, as Sam and his group worked full circle around Whitfield. Only the town remained. If they could but live through this night that was falling around them.

Sam and the others dug deep trenches around their positions, placing dynamite and gas-filled cans in the closer trenches.

All were near exhaustion.

Wilder sent his subjects out in force that night, covering the prairie, seeking out Balon and his few Believers. The night ran red with blood.

The Satan-lovers died screaming and chanting their love of Mephistopheles and their hatred of God Almighty.

At dawn, the small band of Believers slumped to the ground. Their shoulders ached from the pound of high-powered rifles and shotguns. They stank of nervous sweat. Their eyes were red-rimmed from sleeplessness.

As they dragged the dead to a pile, to burn them, Sam wondered how much more any of them could take?

TUESDAY - THE SIXTH DAY

Just past dawn, already hot on the plains, Sam lay looking over the town of Whitfield, Chester by his side.

"They love Satan and his fiery pits so much," Sam said, with a hard grin, "we'll give them a taste of what's in store for them."

"Six gas stations in town," Chester said. "And one bulk plant. The wind is blowing north to south. Perfect!"

Chester had yet to say one word about his dead wife. But there was a recklessness in him that worried Sam.

"We'll fire everything on the north, east, and west. Let the flames work inward. We'll be in position on the south side of town, waiting."

"Let's do it."

They synchronized their watches to the second. Working with this much dynamite and gasoline, ten seconds off any watch could mean trouble, for a gallon of gasoline is equal to a half dozen sticks of dynamite as far as explosiveness and the damage it can do.

Sam's gaze touched them all. "Everybody understand what to do?"

They nodded.

"Then let's roll."

They hit the town in a rush, starting the gas pumps running at full volume, then planting the fire bombs directly in the path of the rushing gasoline, each person praying their pickup would not choose this time to stall on them.

The wind, as if under the direct command of God, picked up, blowing hard from the north.

"We've lost it," Wilder said to Nydia. They stood in the living room of the parsonage. "Whitfield will soon be a raging fire storm, and there is not one thing I can do about it. Damn Balon!"

"What do we do?" there was a touch of fear in her voice.

"Get out, of course, silly woman! Oh, Nydia, you still have much to learn." He shook his head. "Tonight, we loose what we have left upon them. But they've beaten us. My time is

almost over. Soon it will be up to you."

"The tablet?"

He told her where he had hidden it, and she smiled. Wilder shook his head in sorrow. "As our Master's senior agent, I warned him about this place. I begged him to send Michelle after another man of God. I warned him of Balon's strength and courage. But," he sighed, "perhaps it will work out in the end." He took her hand. "Come, my dear, while there is still time."

They walked through the house, Wilder stopping at a picture of Jesus Christ on the wall. He spat at the artist's conception of Christ, the spittle sliding down Christ's serene face.

They walked out the back door and vanished into the air, leaving no trace of their ever being there. Jimmy Perkins, confused and addled, found himself standing on the prairie, alone one second in the bedroom, the next second with Wilder and Nydia on the plains.

Wilder gave the witch a disgusted look. "I thought we left this simpleton behind?"

"He amuses me. Besides, I need a servant."

"Lazy bitch!"

The booming, jarring explosions rocked the town of Whitfield, as thousands of gallons of gasoline detonated, sending flaming balls of fire hurtling over the town, to drop in massive globes of conflagration.

As the Godless ran screaming from the inferno, they were met by preset backfires. Those who escaped the flames were confronted by dynamite, Molotov cocktails, bullets and buckshot. A few escaped, but most died.

Beaten back by the intense heat that engulfed the town, the eight regrouped, Wade saying. "You're sure, Sam, that no one will see this smoke or fire?"

"I'm sure," the minister said. "By now, you should all know the power of Satan."

Miles looked heavenward, a slight smile on his lips.

"We have one more night, one more day, and about five hours of another night. Until midnight of the seventh day," Sam said.

"It took God seven days to create all things," Anita said.

"Yes," the minister said. "Sevens again. It's just another example of Satan's humor—mocking God. He's been doing it for thousands of years. And we won't stop him. Hopefully, we

can run him out of this area, but we won't beat him; he'll just move on to another place. Or, perhaps return here."

"You're the most pessimistic man of God I've ever seen," Wade complained. But Wade, like the others, knew there were some devil worshippers who got away.

The eight stood on a small rise overlooking Whitfield, watching the town burn itself out, hearing the faint screaming of the Godless as they became part of Satan's inferno, drifting into his domain, scorching and smoking.

It was noon of the Sixth day.

That night, not knowing what Wilder might hurl at them, the eight ran for their lives, their very souls, finally, at one o'clock in the morning, barricading themselves in a farm house for an onslaught that never materialized.

Wilder had very few people left to command, but he did have some tricks still up his sleeve.

"No!" Chester screamed out the one word of protest. "No! Damn you—NO!"

Eyes went to the moonlit yard. Eyes filling with horror at the sight before them. John Benton stood with Faye Stokes, the woman covered with dirt from her newly-exited grave. Together, they grinned a ghastly smirk at the house. Benton lifted her funeral dress and fondled her.

Chester went berserk with rage.

It was all the men could do to restrain him, pinning him to the floor.

"It's a trap, Ches!" Sam yelled. "Don't fall for it. They're trying to suck you outside."

But Chester, with the strength of the maddened and angry, threw the men from him. He jumped to his feet and ran weaponless outside.

"Chester," Faye called, opening her arms to him. "Come to me."

Sam tackled the man, dragging him to the ground, trying to pull him back into the house. Chester broke free and ran to his wife's side.

Benton and Faye were on him instantly, biting him, sucking the blood from him. Sam grabbed a canteen of Holy Water and ran to the macabre scene, hurling the blessed water on the trio.

The three of them screamed their pain. It was too late for

Chester.

"Stakes!" Sam yelled. "Hurry!"

As the Godless writhed in pain, attempting to escape the burning water, Sam drove a stake into Benton's chest with one powerful thrust. Wade slammed a stake into Faye, filth from her mouth spraying him, sickening him, the slime dripping from his shirt.

Sam emptied his pistol into the changing body of Chester, hoping that would stop him, hoping he would not have to commit the ultimate act on his friend. But he knew it was too late as he watched the heavy slugs drive his friend back, but not stop him.

Chester came on, grinning, his tongue blood-red, teeth changing with each step, eyes shining with newfound evil.

Sam, a dozen feet from the man, hurled a stake at him, the point burying in the man's chest. Chester's hands clutched at the shaft, pus running over his thickening tongue and pale lips. He swayed for a moment. Sam stepped forward and pushed the stake into his chest, hitting the heart. Chester fell forward, the impact driving the point through him, jutting out his back.

The prairie was quiet under God's moon, the pale white orb illuminating the specter of death around the house. Inside the old home, the sounds of weeping drifted out to Sam. Men and women breaking under the pressure, their emotions lashing out.

Sam stood for a time looking down at what remained of his friend, wondering if the price they were all having to pay was too high?

A few more hours, he thought. Just a few more hours.

Then, finally admitting what he had known all along: It will be *my* turn to meet the Prince of Darkness.

WEDNESDAY - THE SEVENTH DAY

Sam was down mentally this day, the others sensing his depression, but not understanding it.

"We've beaten them, Sam!" Wade tried to lift his minister's mood. "We can coast now."

Sam shook his head. "No, Wade, that's not true. You don't understand the rules of the game."

"Game?" Miles said. "Game? Dear God, this has been a *game*?"

Sam looked around. The others were asleep. "Come on, I want Tony to hear this."

They walked to where the doctor stood on guard. "Now all of you listen to me," Sam said. "Very carefully. If—today I make a decision that seems—rash to you, *don't* try to stop me. I know what I'm doing."

Tony looked puzzled. "I don't understand, Sam."

"It's all over at midnight tonight," Sam explained. "So all rules are off—gone. Satan's dream of a glorious reign in Whitfield has, for now—and remember the word: now—all been destroyed. By us. More specifically, by me. It's me he wants; or something from me, and I think I know what it is. Anyway, *don't* question what I do this afternoon." He glanced at Tony. "Take care of Jane Ann."

"What?"

"You heard me. She's pregnant. Don't ask me how I know that for a fact, I just do. It will be a son. Help Jane Ann raise him. He's going to have to be awfully strong."

Sam walked away, leaving three very puzzled men. He walked to the top of a small rise, to stand there alone, looking up at the Heavens, talking softly with his God.

"He knows," Wilder said. "He's made up his mind. Balon is making his peace with his God, now."

Nydia felt desire well up in her. "Then I'll have him?"

"If all goes well." He willed his thoughts to be heard by his Master, and the Master listened and agreed.

Wilder's smile was bittersweet as he listened to his Master lay down the new rules of this game.

"What does our Prince say?" Nydia asked, irritated because

she was excluded from the conversation.

"You get your wish, Nydia. The Prince has looked into the mind of Balon."

"And?"

"Him for me."

"I wish I could say I'll miss you, Black," her smile was full of mockery.

"You obviously have forgotten the pain of birthing a demon, Nydia."

"No. I haven't forgotten, Black. And I don't know if I shall survive the birthing—I'm older now. But whatever price I have to pay, it will be worth it. For both of us."

"Nydia," Wilder's voice softened, and she looked at him. "We have never really cared for one another, but we have worked well together—most of the time. Altogether, you are probably the most beautiful witch I have ever seen. Thoroughly disgusting at times, but that is part of a witch's nature. I must warn you of this: Balon's mate is with child. A boy child. And you know he will be strong, as well as blessed—blessed as much as a mortal can be, that is.

"Remember this, Nydia, and remember it well, you will have but a few hours to seduce him, and Balon is a strong-willed man."

"I won't fail, Black."

"I hope not." He took her hand. "Come, it's time."

"Sam?" Jane Ann called. "There are two people walking toward the camp—out on the plains."

"I see them," Sam was calm. "I've been expecting them."

"There is someone else lagging behind them," Miles said, peering through binoculars. "It's Jimmy!"

Sam said nothing.

"Hello the camp!" Wilder called, stopping a few hundred yards from the small band of Believers.

"My God against your Master?" Sam returned the shout.

"Something to that effect," Wilder's voice boomed over the rolling grass effortlessly. "But nothing so dramatic as that. That would be the war to end all wars. And then our Gods could not play their little games with each other. What would they then do to amuse themselves?"

"I may assume I'm to be one of the protagonists in this little drama?"

"Singular, Mr. Balon."

"And if I win?"

"You make me laugh, sir. You can do nothing but lose."

Sam shook off Jane Ann's restraining hand and walked out to Wilder and Nydia. He stopped by Tony's side on the edge of the camp. "Remember what I said, Tony." He walked out of the camp without looking back.

Sam faced the warlock. "I can't win? Perhaps you'd better explain that?"

"Surely, sir. You see, Mr. Balon, your God doesn't make deals. With your God it is all or nothing. Not so with my Master. By now, sir, you must know that all previous rules no longer apply. I can destroy you all with a snap of my fingers."

Sam smiled. "But not me, Mr. Wilder."

"Not I, sir, is correct. But grammatical faux pas need not concern us this day. However, you are correct in your assumption that I cannot harm you—yet."

"And your proposition—?"

For a very brief moment, Wilder's look was of admiration. It passed quickly. "You are a man of honor, are you not, sir?"

"I like to think so."

"And if you give your word?"

"I keep it."

"At all costs?"

"Right."

"How marvelously human. Now hear me, Mr. Balon, I can kill your friends—all of them—in a most disgusting manner. I can turn them into roaches. Remember, sir, we are playing under a new set of rules. I can whisk the women away from this place and have them on their backs as whores before you can blink. I can do anything I wish—with them." He glanced at Jane Ann, alone in the distance. "I will have her first. I will take her in every way known. I will enjoy her wailing as I mount her from the rear. After I have done with her, I shall give her eternal life—as a whore. Do you want that to happen?"

"You know I don't," Sam said gently.

Wilder glanced at Nydia. Her smile was mocking. He sighed. "The moment I knew would someday come, and someday is now."

"There have been others, Black," the witch said.

"I assure you, my dear, that is but a small consolation." He looked at Sam. "Well, sir, here it is: Me for you."

"What's the catch?"

"Oh, my, sir! You are a suspicious man, aren't you?"

"Come on, Black—what's the catch?"

His smile was not pleasant. "I allow you to destroy me. That is my Master's wish." He shrugged. "It is a small thing, I assure you. No matter how you go about it, I won't die. I'll just leave here to join my Prince."

"Get to the point, Black."

This time, Wilder's smile was genuine. "Then, sir, you will be hers," he cut his eyes to Nydia, "to do with as she desires—until midnight."

"I can resist if I choose?"

"Oh, my, yes! I wouldn't have it any other way."

Nydia's face darkened with anger. "Damn you, Black!" she spat the words venomously. "That wasn't in the deal."

His smile broadened. "It is now, my dear."

"You son-of-a bitch!" she cursed the warlock.

Laughter sprang from his mouth. "Of course, I am. Who do you think birthed me, the Virgin Mary?"

"I'll be back in a minute," Sam said. "You two carry on your war."

"We've been doing just that for centuries," Wilder stopped the minister cold.

Sam turned. "Centuries?"

"How old is sin, young man?" Wilder asked.

"Very old."

"Then so are we."

Sam walked to the camp, picking up a stake. He looked at Jane Ann. "I'm not going to kiss you or touch you, honey. If I did that, I'd want to stay—and I can't. I love you, don't forget that. And I know you're carrying my child—our child. Stay with Tony when this is over. You two have a lot in common. He'll help you raise our child—our son. Make our son a man, Janey, a real man. Instill in him virtue, but don't make him a pansy. I want him to appreciate fine music, the arts, and I want him in the military to pull his hitch. That's important, Janey. I want him in a tough outfit; a hard-assed special unit. He's going to need all the training he can get."

"Sam!" she was crying.

"Be still and listen to me."

But the words would not form on his tongue. Words of more warning; of things he knew would come in the future would not pass his lips. The minister struggled to speak, but found he could not.

All right! Sam silently spoke to God. Have it Your way. But You will help my son by Jane Ann when he meets my son

from Nydia?

How weak you must think you are! His voice boomed in Sam's head.

I'm a mortal! Sam returned the silent shout.

No more booming filled the minister's head. But as his voice returned to him, he heard a whispered reply: *I will help!*

"Goodbye," Sam said to his wife, to his friends. He walked into the prairie.

Wilder's eyes touched the stake in Sam's hand. "Oh, you would choose that method," he said disgustedly.

"May we talk for a few moments?" Sam asked.

Wilder looked at Nydia, then cut his eyes to Jimmy, standing a few yards away, picking his nose. "Get that buffoon out of here."

And Jimmy was gone.

Sam blinked.

"Of course, we may chat for a few moments, sir," Black said. "You may be sure I am in no frantic rush to return to Hell. It's a dismal place, at best. Depressing."

"The Church of the Fifteen—it will continue to thrive?"

"Certainly! Everywhere there is a cult—of any kind or type. My Master already has plans formulated for the 1970s. It should be interesting."

"I don't understand any of this," Sam said, lifting the stake. "Not just this—all of it."

Wilder chuckled. "There is nothing terribly complicated about it, sir. It's a game. A high-rolling crap shoot between the biggest players at the table. Your shooter gambles on the hope of Love winning for Him. My shooter gambles on what you call Sin winning for him. I can tell you this, sir: A little water and a better class of residents and there would be no difference between Heaven and Hell."

Despite what lay before him, Sam chuckled. "I almost like you, Black. Even though you are a double-dealing son-of-a-bitch!"

Wilder grinned. "I'm told that if there had not been a most unfortunate slipup nine months prior to my birth, I would be an Angel."

"A slight indiscretion on the part of your mother?"

"Correct. Sam, I don't fear what you're about to do to me. I'm *not* going to die. I *can't* die! I died almost five thousand years ago."

For a moment, Sam felt a mishmash of emotions for Black Wilder. Then he remembered the man that destroyed a town

full of people.

"No, Mr. Balon," Wilder read his thoughts. "I did not destroy those people. *You* destroyed those people, sir. I gave them what they longed and lusted for. And I assure you, sir, ninety-five percent of them were eager to join me."

"And you tortured and degraded and murdered those who would not join."

Wilder shrugged. "A few, perhaps. No matter—that is my job. You will see, Sam, when you arrive in Heaven—if you arrive," he added, smiling, "that Heaven is sparsely populated." He sighed. "And Hell is abysmally overcrowded. The people who came to me, sir? Don't trouble your mind with them. They were greedy, grasping, hypocritical, arrogant, ignorant, bigoted, shallow fools!"

Sam recalled Father Dubois saying much the same thing.

"I think you are of above-average intellect, Mr. Balon, so allow me to tell you something." A flash of irritation crossed his face. "I *do* wish we had some proper place to sit—and perhaps some tea. I don't often get the opportunity to discuss matters of any importance with intelligent people. Nydia is really a very vulgar bitch, as you will soon discover."

She laughed at him.

"You see? One can't even insult her. What I was going to say, sir, is this; did you know—of course not!—how *could* you know? Well, my Master once tried to make a deal with your God. Oh, yes! Make a deal and stop all this petty bickering and backbiting that has been going on between Them for thousands of years. The deal went straight down the line. Fifty/fifty. Every other person. Your God turned it down. Unbelievable!"

Sam wasn't sure he was really hearing all this.

Wilder looked at the seven people in the camp, grouped together, watching them. "There," he waved his hand, "is a perfect example of what I'm referring to. Out of almost three thousand people, only a handful really resisted enough to beat my Master. That is pathetic, Balon!"

"I'll admit that a lot of people will be disappointed come Judgment Day."

"Many more than you realize, sir." Wilder's eyes touched the stake. "Do it. I'm weary of all this. Perhaps we'll meet again in a few hundred years. Or," he smiled, "tomorrow."

"Are you telling me that when man dies, he goes directly to Heaven or Hell?"

"I'm afraid, sir, there are certain areas I am forbidden to

discuss with mortals. Rules of the game, don't you know?"

"Well—" Sam raised the stake.

Black leaned close to Sam, grinning wickedly, and whispered in his ear, "Nydia is really a great piece of ass, Sam!"

Black drew back, roaring with laughter at the astonishment on Sam's face and the hissing from the witch.

Sam drove the stake into Black's chest, burying the shaft up to his knuckles.

But there was no foul odor. No horrible metamorphosis. Black Wilder was simply no longer with them. The stake lay on the ground. Sam's expression was of utter confusion.

"Do you believe a mortal man can kill an Angel?" Nydia asked, amused at Sam.

"What? No! No, of course not."

"Then why did you think you could kill a Prince of Satan?"

"What happened to him?"

"He went home."

"Will he be back?"

"I don't know. All I know is he failed his assignment."

"I see."

"No, you don't, darling. You're still a mortal. For a while, that is." She took his hand. "Come, it's growing dark, and I have much to do and not long in which to do it."

"You're going to lose this battle, Nydia," Sam said, as he felt himself being pulled into velvety darkness. The darkness was incredibly soft and satiny wet. Like a woman, he thought, and with that thought, knew he was in trouble.

Then the darkness changed into a rainbow of blinding hues and Sam felt himself falling.

Her voice came to him in the whirling vortex of colors, all tinted with black. "No, darling. No, you lose. You could have sacrificed your wife and your friends, and we would have been forced to retreat."

"But then," Sam's voice had a hollow ring to it, "my son would not have been bom—would he?"

She laughed. "Correct. You see, this is how we play the game to its conclusion. You're on your own, my darling. Your God allowed you the option, and you took it."

He felt her hands on his body, pulling at his clothes.

And they were naked.

He fought her.

Sam's body was found the next morning. There was not a

mark on him. Scrawled next to the naked body, in the earth, was the message: HE MET ME—AND I DO RESPECT COURAGE.

The initial S was beneath the sentence.

"Met who?" Doris asked.

"Sam signed his own death message?" Wade asked.

"No," Jane Ann said. "Satan."

Miles took his wife's hand. Just before they walked away, he said, "For there liveth no man on earth who is so righteous that he sinneth not."

Jane Ann sat in the newly constructed home outside what was left of Whitfield, her hands folded over her swelling stomach. She watched the snow fall, covering the plains just as the governor and federal people had ordered the covering-up of what had really happened in Whitfield and this part of Fork County.

A cult killing, was what the press was told, followed by a massive fire that destroyed the town. The press was told that by the governor, by federal people, by senior members of the Highway Patrol, by senior members of the FBI, and, most importantly, by Wade Thomas, one of the survivors. For after all, Wade Thomas was a respected small-town editor: no reason for him to lie about it.

The cult members, several hundred strong, had put something in the water system of Whitfield. The people went berserk, killing crazy, burning the town.

No, it was not yet known what was put in the water. The government lab people were working on that right now.

Maybe the Russians had something to do with it? the question was asked.

Maybe, was the reply, but we have no proof.

The cold war was freezing the world: it was easy to blame the Russians.

The press was not told about the bodies that lay rotting under the sun, on the prairie. Bodies that had to be burned by special units of the military; units known for keeping their mouths shut. These units moved in quickly, securing the area, sealing it off, cleaning it up.

And no one would speak of the evil. Not for more than twenty-one years.

And the boy that would soon emerge from Jane Ann's womb—he would not be told of what happened or who he was. Not for almost twenty-two years.

Slowly, a few families were moving into the area: relatives were taking over the burned-out ranches. Whitfield would never be the same, but another town was being built by Army Engineers and Navy Seabees. They were ordered by the president to keep their mouths shut.

They did just that. The president was also a five star

general.

A few buildings had gone up, many more would follow in the spring.

The town would need a doctor, so Tony stayed. Jane Ann married him. The town would need a paper, so Wade and Anita stayed. The town would need a department store, so Miles and Doris stayed.

"What happened?" their children asked.

"A tragedy," they were told.

Not a lie.

Less than fifty survivors crawled out of the rubble and picked up their lives, with the help of government psychiatrists. Including a teenage girl named Jean Zagone and several cowboys. None of the seven believed a word Jean or the cowboys said, but they kept their opinions to themselves.

"Someday," Wade said, "we'll have to kill them."

"Or he will," Jane Ann patted her swelling belly.

Whitfield would keep its dark secrets for a time.

Tons of explosives blasted the area in and around Tyson's Lake. The military believed they finally killed all the Beasts.

The surviving seven knew better.

The blasts drove the Beasts deeper into the earth, where their Master ordered them to sleep. Sleep, until he called them out. And after the military left, the Sentry surfaced, watching.

And the smashed, mashed, non-human thing that Jane Ann had driven over that first night of terror crawled from its sewer hiding place and into a dark, damp basement beneath the rubble of Whitfield. It healed itself, and then it slept. Waiting.

Around the county, there were other . . . creatures who slipped into hiding places. Satan closed their eyes, ordering them to sleep until he needed them.

They waited for his call.

THE FAGARAS MOUNTAINS, ROMANIA - 1958

Nydia sat in her villa, looking at the snow fall, her hands folded across her swelling belly. She was more beautiful than ever in her pregnancy.

The Demons in her kicked with life.

The witch smiled.

Jimmy patiently brushed her long hair.

NELSON COLLEGE, NY - 1980

The card on the door of room fifteen read: Sam B. Williams and Sam B. King. Inside, the two young men met each other for the first time.

They were both tall young men, well built. Each of them wore their hair short, just a bit longer than military fashion. They were older than average Freshmen, for each had spent three years in the military.

"Well, with two Sam's and two B's, that ought to confuse everybody around here," a young man laughed.

"Yes," the second young man smiled, his black eyes giving away nothing. "What's your initial stand for?"

"Balon. How about yourself?"

"Black."

Sam Balon King looked at a picture on a dresser. A very beautiful young woman, with dark eyes and shining black hair. "She's lovely." he said. "Your girl?"

"My twin sister."

"Sure! I should have noticed. What's her name?"

"Nydia."

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